



Didn't I Say
to Make My Abilities
Average in the
Next Life?!

Story by
FUNA

Illustrated by
Itsuki Akata

15



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Didn't I Say —
to Make My Abilities
Average in the
— Next Life?!

VOLUME 15





Engines at
full throttle,
Kragon!

Ready for liftoff!



Didn't I Say _____ to Make My Abilities *Average* in the _____ Next Life?!

VOLUME 15

BY
FUNA

ILLUSTRATED BY
Itsuki Akata



Seven Seas Entertainment

WATASHI, NORYOKU WA HEIKINCHI DETTE ITTAYONE! vol.15
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God bless me?
C O N T E N T S

CHAPTER 105: THE SEAL

CHAPTER 106: ON THE ROAD

CHAPTER 107: THE BEAST VILLAGE

CHAPTER 108: ANNIHILATION

CHAPTER 109: GOING UNDERCOVER

CHAPTER 110: CRUSHED

CHAPTER 111: BACK AT THE VILLAGE

BONUS STORY: THE INVITATION

AFTERWORD

Japan



A high school student. Died saving a little girl and was reborn into a fantasy world.

C-Rank Party "The Crimson Vow"



A girl who was granted "average" abilities in this fantasy world.

Kingdom of Tils



A strong-willed female hunter. Specializes in combat magic.



A young noblewoman and Adele's friend. Leader of the Wonder Trio.



A swordswoman. Leader of the hunting party the Crimson Vow.



A hunter and healing magic user.
A timid girl, but...



An innkeeper's daughter. Always on the lookout for ways to save money.



The strongest, most intelligent beings in the world. Can speak human languages.



The Kingdom
of Vanolark

The Turning Point:
The Return to Ascham

Capital
Shaleiraz

The Kingdom
of Brandel

The Spice Incident

The town of the
Dueling Inns

Fief of Ascham



Capital

The Kingdom
of Tils

Birthplace of the
Crimson Vow

Capital

The Town Where Mille
Registered as a Hunter

The Kingdom
of Marlane

Capital

Mafan

THE DWARVEN VILLAGE
Glademarl

Neighboring
Kingdom

Capital

Town

Town

Imperial
Capital

Mountain Region



The Great
Albarn Empire



God bless me?

WORLD MAP

Previously

When Adele von Ascham, the eldest daughter of Viscount Ascham, was ten years old, she was struck with a terrible headache and, just like that, remembered everything.

She remembered how, in her previous life, she was an eighteen-year-old Japanese girl named Kurihara Misato who died while trying to save a young girl, and that she met God...

Misato had exceptional abilities, and the expectations of those around her were high. As a result, she could never live her life the way she wanted. So when she met God, she made an impassioned plea: "In my next life, please make my abilities average!"

Yet somehow, it all went awry.

In her new life, she can talk to nanomachines, and although her magical powers are technically average, it is the average between a human's and an elder dragon's...6,800 times that of a sorcerer!

At the first academy she attended, she made friends and rescued a little boy as well as a princess. She registered at the Hunters' Prep School under the name of Mile and made a grand debut with the Crimson Vow—the party she formed with her classmates.

The party accompanied Clairia, Aetelou, and their companions, the elves who live amongst humans, back to their home village. All heck broke loose at an elven mixer, where the village's future hung in the balance!

Then, they made an excursion to the kingdom of Aubram, where they encountered invaders from another dimension?! After the Crimson Vow successfully repelled the machine life-forms from across the rift, it seemed the danger had finally passed...

Chapter 105:

The Seal

“...**S**AY WHAT?”

Obviously, the Crimson Vow were not going to read the letter right there in the guild hall. They waited until they returned to their inn, only to find...

“Kragon says he needs to see us again. And this time he’s bringing all the top brass, their elder and their chief and everyone. It does seem like they left out that kid of a leader though, and I don’t see any mention of Berdetice, either... In other words, this is a grown-up talk. No kids or youngsters allowed. We might actually get to have a serious conversation this time.”

“I mean, *they* may not be bringing any kids, but we’ve still got a kid right here. That gonna be a problem?” Reina teased.

“Wh...?!” Mile pouted, puffing out her cheeks.

Currently, the only one of their number who was still considered underage was Mile, at thirteen. Pauline had been only fourteen

when they first met but had since passed the threshold of adulthood on her fifteenth birthday. Of course, Reina was joking. In this case, age had nothing to do with it, since there was no way the elder dragons would even consider having a conversation with them without Mile around. However...

“What do you think they’re after?” asked Mavis, face taut.

You either had to have a lot of guts or be a monumental fool to be cracking jokes here, given who they were dealing with. Reina was the former. Having battled the elder dragons as many times as she had would have to count for something.

Strange as it seemed, dealing with elder dragons had become second nature. That was all there was to it.

“What they’re after is...” Mile started. The group collectively gulped, waiting with bated breath. “...I have no idea. They didn’t say!”

The tension was immediately broken.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured!” grouched Reina.

“I could have surmised as much...” Pauline sighed.

“Ha ha! Don’t know what I was expecting,” Mavis chuckled.

Though the three of them laughed, Mile looked vexed.

“It’s not *my* fault! Kragon’s the one who left that important detail out of the letter!”

In reality, it was probably some demon or beastperson who had physically penned the letter, but Mile was not incorrect.

“So, what *does* it say then?” Reina urged.

Mile proceeded to review the contents of the letter. “Um, it says he’ll be bringing a group of eight leaders, including the elder and the chief, so we should come meet them. The meeting place seems close enough to here. He says it’s what the local humans call ‘the Quiet Forest’...”

“Oh yeah. That’s only about a half a day away. If the dragons fly straight from their home, they should be able to get there without passing over any major cities. It’s deep in the woods, so there shouldn’t be any human villages in the immediate vicinity, either,” Mavis explained, knowing she was more familiar with the area than Mile.

“So when’s the meeting?” Reina asked—a natural question.

“He didn’t say.”

“Come again?” Reina’s face scrunched in confusion.

“I mean, that’s how it was last time, too, right? There wasn’t any date listed—it was just like, ‘As soon as you get this letter you better come.’ I’d guess that elder dragons don’t even have the concept of schedules. It’s only natural to them that if they summon any other life-form, they will drop everything else they’re doing to come running, and then, those lesser beings will obviously just continue to wait until the dragons are ready to go,” Mavis explained. “Kragon has always been pretty good to us, but I’d suppose he’s no different from the rest of them in that regard. I don’t think he means anything by it.”

The others nodded in agreement.

“Oh!” Mile seemed to have just realized something. “We were gone for a while, though. I wonder how long ago this letter got here.”

“Ah...” The other three cringed.

This isn't great, they all thought, beads of nervous sweat forming on their foreheads.

“You're *late*!”

As the Crimson Vow veered off of the main road and into the outskirts of the so-called Quiet Forest, a single beastman stood waiting for them on the side of a path. Behind him, in the grass, was a one-man tent. Beside that was a simple stoneware stove and a log that had been fashioned into a human-shaped dummy, perhaps so that he could pass the time with some sword practice.

“Do you have any idea how long I've been waiting, you jerks?! With their sense of time, those elder dragons can laze around in the forest for weeks—months even! But do you know how hard it is for a creature like me to wait around for days in a place like this, all by myself?! I've already run through all the rations I brought. I've barely had anything to eat the past few days! What *took* you so long?!”

The old beastman was livid.

“It's not our fault! We just got back yesterday from a job that took us to another kingdom. You're the ones who decided to set up this meeting without even checking to see if we were away and then didn't even set a specific time!” Reina protested. “Are you saying that *we're* in the wrong for working hard to complete our job when we didn't even know that letter had arrived? Why don't you tell us just exactly *how* we've messed up here, hmm?”

“Er...” The beastman was flummoxed. She was not wrong. “Very well. Please shoot three fireballs up into the air.”

This again...? The members of the Crimson Vow sighed, annoyed, but there had been pushback the last time they had complained, so they silently did as

instructed. Then, for the sake of the apparently starving beastman, Mile produced some food from her inventory. She never missed a beat when it came to food.

“Oh, here they come...”

A few minutes after the signal was launched, nine shadows appeared in the sky. It went without saying that these were the elder dragons. They should have been waiting somewhere in the forest, but they had probably been asleep, or perhaps it had taken them some time to round up all the individuals who were off tormenting the local wildlife.

But if they were already in the immediate environs, why would they fly straight up into the sky just to fly back down again? The hunters knew the elder dragons well enough at this point to guess that it was probably just because they thought it looked cooler.

The earth quaked as the nine dragons alighted on the ground with a series of thudding booms.

Let's see... So that bratty kid leader isn't here, and neither is Berdetice. Kragon was supposed to be escorting the big shots without any additional fighters, so the one who's standing a little bit apart from the others, with the decoration I carved into their talon, must be...

“Great to see you again, Kragon!”

It was Kragon, no doubt about it.

“Yes, wonderful to see you in good health, Miss Mile.”

Oh good, I was right! she thought. She wasn't surprised she'd been able to recognize him—it really was obvious. Though she was unable to tell the dragons apart based on their facial features, determining someone's identity based on circumstantial evidence was a skill Mile had frequently employed in her previous life as Misato, so she was rather adept at it.

When they had previously met Kragon alone, he had addressed her as “Lady Mile.” Obviously, he hesitated to use so formal an address in front of other

elder dragons and had settled on “Miss” this time instead.

“What is it you have called us here for today?” asked Mile, a touch more dignified than usual as she, too, picked up on the mood of the group.

This had to be important, if the elder dragons’ leaders had come along. Not to mention the strange things already happening in the neighboring regions. Surely...

“Mm, yes, well, we have come here today with an exceedingly important matter. Here before you stand the head of our clan, our clan elder, and the six members of our council of leaders. As for the matter at hand...”

The members of the Crimson Vow gulped.

“We’d like you to engrave all of our claws and horns,” said Kragon. The eight other dragons nodded fervently in agreement.

“Wh—Seriously?!?!?” the members of the Crimson Vow exclaimed.

“I should have known,” Mile muttered, shaking her head. The fact of the matter was that she *had* offered to do some engravings for the other dragons, should Kragon’s work prove popular with the females. That said, she’d only really meant it for the soldiers who’d been present at the time. And she’d only really offered at all because she felt like she had to in order to keep the captain who’d been her first test subject from getting into more trouble.

So, why would these higher-ups slight those warriors by making their way here first in order to demand engravings?

“What of the soldiers?” she asked.

“Um, yes, well, that is...”

Kragon averted his eyes. This told Mile all she needed to know.

“This really wasn’t what I meant when I said I could do more of the carvings! I really only said it out of consideration for the soldiers, and for the captain’s position!”

There was a telling pause.

Kragon surely had known this. As far as elder dragons went, he was rather

sagacious and not especially prideful. Still, he found himself at a loss at her reaction. When not in battle, he knew Mile to be typically mild mannered, comparatively awkward, with a face as vacant as a field mouse. He had assumed she'd barely be aware of the distinctions between the individual elder dragons whose horns and nails she'd be carving, maybe even that she'd be honored to deal with elder dragon leaders rather than common soldiers. She should be *happy* to accept, he thought.

And while they naturally couldn't be so discourteous as to *ask* for scales as recompense, the Crimson Vow could sneakily collect all the carved-off fragments afterward, which should be more than enough payment for Mile's services. Those fragments could sell for a lot of money...assuming the seller had a way to prove that they were genuinely from elder dragon talons and horns.

But the Crimson Vow, naturally, had a system in place for this. If someone already had more than ten elder dragon scales on hand, it wouldn't be strange for them to also have some fragments or dust from their horns and nails. And no one who already possessed that many scales, which could fetch so much money, would risk painting targets on their own backs by selling counterfeit horns and nails. Thus, Kragon had no doubt that the pudgy—to an elder dragon, someone of Pauline's build inevitably looked pudgy—miser of a girl would give her ringing endorsement to the possibility of Mile fulfilling the elder dragons' request.

And yet, all four of the girls looked unhappy.

“Oy! What's the hold up here?! Hurry up and get started, you lowly little...”

“Shhhhhh!!!”

As one of the dragons started to spit something rather untoward, the others clamped their claws over his mouth. Apparently, they had all been briefed on how they were to deal with the Crimson Vow. There was a certain measure of consideration the hunters were to be shown, human or not. It seemed this particular individual—whether because the briefing had gone over his head or because he felt there was no reason for a great elder dragon to respect the likes of some lowly human—had missed the memo.

But really, no client should ever purposely anger an artisan or craftsperson

right before a job. The effects such behavior would have on the work itself would most certainly be detrimental.

“A-anyway, when the leader, elder, and esteemed council members received word of what you had done to the horns and nails of our soldiers, Miss Mile, they declared that they must come and investigate the matter themselves, directly, at once.”

And then they figured they’d get some carvings themselves, huh? The members of the Crimson Vow groaned internally.

“Do as you like, Mile,” Reina directed. “I’m pretty sure you’re the only person capable of doing something this outlandish, and whether you accept or refuse it, we’ll go along with your decision. After all, we are...”

“Allies, bound at the soul!”

“The Crimson Vow!!!”

Kaboooooom!!

Their audience today consisted of eight (plus one) of the most influential elder dragons, the strongest beings in this world. As an explosion of four-colored smoke unfurled grandly before them, the elder dragons turned to each other and said...

“Th...that was so cool...”

It was a hit! Rehearsed moves and poses put on show for the benefit of an audience had quite a novel appeal to elder dragons, who had few amusements and no concept of performances or theater—regardless of their advanced age.

“Anyway,” Mile announced, “I am going to have to decline your request. I’ve already decided the next elder dragons to receive this treatment will be your warriors. And I’m going to need feedback from the captain and any lady dragons of his acquaintance first, so I can perfect my technique for further treatments. That first carving was a show of gratitude from us to the warriors,

for retreating against the orders of their higher-ups and for explaining everything to the villagers. It was our way of thanking them and also a means of medical treatment. But we're not in *your* debt—are we? You did nothing about the rampaging child you call your leader, even when you were the only ones in a position to do so.”

“Uh...”

The dragons were lost for words, seeming to recognize the truth of Mile's accusations. Fortunately, she immediately offered a compromise.

“Still, I feel terrible about sending you away after you've traveled so far, especially knowing that you're such a senior group of individuals. So, in lieu of payment for my services, I would like to ask you all a number of questions. We would be most grateful to hear the tales of the elder dragons, who are wise in so many ways that we humans are not, and I believe that it is well worth offering my services in exchange for such wisdom. Does that sound reasonable?”

“Uh... Erm, yes, I suppose that is fair. It is true that sharing our eternal wellspring of knowledge would honor these humans. Furthermore, they can then spread our tales through the land, raising the esteem for elder dragons amongst all their species. For human maidens, these four are rather wise...”

The dragons—who had previously been more inclined to see the Crimson Vow as lesser life-forms—seemed to have a change of heart.

There was no creature in the world who would dare openly oppose or criticize an elder dragon. Likewise, one would never praise nor flatter them. Ordinary living beings would never approach them, let alone speak to them, just as no one would ever walk up to Cerberus to feed it a treat or pat it on the head.

Even the beastfolk and demons who operated at the elder dragons' behest were probably too reverent to do much besides obey their commands. They never went so far as to *praise* them. Thus, no matter how much smarter than humans the elder dragons might be, they were not accustomed to being lauded so directly, and Mile's little speech flattered them into a good mood.

“Now then, ask whatever you please. What manner of tale would you like to hear? A story of the founding of this nation? Or perhaps of the great war that

took place half a millennium ago, or the mysterious barren plain some hundreds of kilometers across on another continent...”

“Huh? Wait, don’t tell me...”

A number of words floated through Mile’s head, but she brushed them all away.

Instead, she asked, “What I would like to know is why you’ve been sending demons and beastfolk to investigate those ruins. What do you hope to accomplish? How much do you know of the otherworldly invasions currently occurring? Also, do you know of any little beastgirls who live around here?”

“What the hell?!?!”

The elder dragons were dumbfounded by the line of questioning. The members of the Crimson Vow merely sighed, resigned to the inevitability of Mile mixing her nonsensical final question in with such actually relevant inquiries.

“Wh-why do you know anything about all this, you fiend?!” raged the dragon who was presumably the clan elder, seemingly forgetting all about horn decor. This was, apparently, more serious business. **“This is forbidden knowledge, held only by a fraction of even we elder dragons. No human could ever possibly know of...”**

There were, of course, plenty of humans who knew about the investigations by now, given that the elder dragons had subcontracted much of the work to demons and beastfolk. Therefore, it was likely not Mile’s knowledge of the investigations so much as the part after that—the “otherworldly invasions”—that the elder was referring to. It stood to reason that the investigation teams had probably been fed some pretext, while the real purpose of their assignments remained top secret.

“I mean, I’ve just been figuring out what I can based on observation. I’ve witnessed what appear to be rifts in space-time three times: during a cultic ritual, at the dwarven village, and while investigating in the kingdom of Aubram. Plus, we encountered and dealt with the aberrant monsters a number of times. And there’s the golems, which the apparently mature and peaceful prehistorical civilization left behind as their legacy, and which seem to be defensive

machines geared toward melee combat, no beam cannons attached or anything... I suppose the ones that survived all these eons would be the ones that were simplest, sturdiest, and most durable in construction...”

Indeed, the golems had cores in the middle of their bodies that seemed to control all their functions. Their other parts were incredibly simplistic, not requiring much skill or many materials to repair. This was especially true of the rock golems.

The Scavengers, meanwhile, were mostly there as logistical support and were quite speedy, so it was rare for them to be wiped out in battle. On the occasion that one of them broke down, they themselves or their companions could repair them with little material cost or effort. However, the Scavengers’ range of operation was limited, and if they pushed too hard, they could be spotted by humans and wiped out. As a result, any defensive machines that required rarer materials for their maintenance would gradually fall into disrepair and cease to function, after which there was little to be done. Of course, now that Mile had lifted their restrictions, there was less worry of that...

“Wh...?”

The elder was stunned silent, and rightfully so. This was forbidden knowledge, secrets hidden from all but the elders of every generation, as well as those who assumed the role of “secret elders” (those tapped for leadership should an elder suddenly kick the bucket before a proper succession could be arranged). And yet, it had somehow become available to a member of a short-lived race, one that had already forgotten all lore of what had occurred so long ago.

The elder gritted his teeth, reticent, then answered Mile’s final question:

“You may find many young beastgirls at the beastfolk settlement, but you shan’t find that anywhere around here.”

“That’s what he’s mad about?!” the three other members of the Crimson Vow shouted, as Mile slumped to the ground.

The knowledge they sought was forbidden, unknown to all but the most elite of elder dragons. It was unimaginable that it might ever reach the ears of any

other races. However, if the information had already gotten out by other means, there was no point in insisting on silence or hunting down rogue elements to further protect those secrets. In fact, there were probably plenty of people who had possessed such knowledge in the distant past...

This made the Crimson Vow feel more at ease. Given that the hunters already knew the gist of things, the dragons deemed it appropriate to fill them in on the details. Indeed, it would create more trouble if the girls started spreading a story that was close to the truth but full of misunderstandings on the finer points. And if any of those misunderstandings made it up to human leadership, a worst case scenario like the Great Demi-human War was within the realm of possibility. Yes—in light of the circumstances, it was not at all strange that the elders should deign to share some measure of information.

“Once upon a time, when the world was young, there lived a brilliant group of humans...”

“Why are you telling this like some ancient legend?!”

“Well, the story *is* ancient...”

“Ah. Of course.” Mile’s interjection was easily brushed off, and the elder dragon continued his tale:

Long ago, there was a group of culturally advanced humans. However, misfortune befell this group, dealing them a heavy blow. They managed to survive but only at great cost, and there was no telling when something similar might occur again. And so, the people boarded a boat to the heavens and left this world for good.

A portion of the populace stayed behind. And with them stayed the benevolent Seven Sages. To guard them. To protect them. To be allies.

“To you, we grant wisdom and power.”

“Dearest Pero, please protect our children...”

An ancient contract.

A duty. A promise. A *raison d’être*.

Lost knowledge. A ruined civilization. A vanished people.

And a disaster that might occur again at any time.

...An enemy.

“Dearest Pero, please protect our children.”

“Dearest Pero, please protect our children.”

“Dearest Pero, please protect our children.”

“Pero... Would that be...?”

“Lord Pero, one of the Original Twelve, most likely... We were the progenitors,” the elder explained.

The members of the Crimson Vow were silent. If this was all true and not some mere legend...

A crisis that would lead to the destruction of the world.

The fact that elder dragons rarely killed humans unless those humans had attempted to harm them, or threatened to cause some large-scale extinction, or perpetuated intense violence against another race...

“‘Progenitors’ would mean that you weren’t there before that, right?”

The elder gave no reply.

“Wait—I don’t get it,” said Reina. “You weren’t there at the time. You’re just passing down the legends that were passed down to you...”

Though her companions were confused, something clicked for Mile, perhaps because this aligned with the information she had received from the “No. 3 Auxiliary Backup System of the Economical Autonomous Basic Defense Control System.”

“Do you know about the ‘One-Seventh Plan’ or the ‘Super Soldier’ program?”

“Never heard of it.”

“I see. Well, I have some theories, anyway...”

Yes, she had some thoughts about skilled combatants, and things at one-

seventh scale.

“So... Is this all right?”

“Is what all right?”

“Well, I mean, we knew about this stuff before, but you were keeping this information secret from the other dragons, weren’t you?”

There were, after all, eight dragons present here besides the elder. The elder, however, shook his head.

“That only applies in times of peace. Should the time come when it becomes necessary to reveal this information to everyone, we will do so. If we shared this information in peacetime, it might cause chaos or prompt some to try and harm humans. After all, we elder dragons were...”

The elder did not complete his sentence, but Mile knew what he was implying.

They were created by humans...



“So, other than the stories that were passed down, what do you recall of the monsters and such from when you were young?”

“Nothing.”

“Uh...

“When you are as old as I am, it’s hard to remember things from that long ago, no matter how strong an impression they left. Everyday things begin to grow jumbled in your mind, until you can’t remember when they were or what exactly happened. Do any of you recall what you ate for dinner on the night of your third birthday? Do you recall how many loaves of bread you’ve ever eaten? Our life spans are so many orders of magnitude longer than yours. If we didn’t start to let go of memories of the past, we’d never get by!”

“That’s fair...”

Plus, creatures like dinosaurs were said to have pretty small brains. If elder dragons’ brains were equally small, and they were somehow squeezing more intellect out of them than humans could, then their brains were probably already working at full capacity, without much wiggle room.

It takes a lot of work to avoid putting too much stress on your brain...

“You were thinking something rude just now, weren’t you?!” the elder suddenly shouted.

“Wh...? How’d you know...?”

“I knew it!!!”

“Ah...”

After that, the members of the Crimson Vow were able to coax the dragon elder into telling them various tales that he could remember. Some were clearly oft-told legends, framed in simple sentences and mixed with rhymes for their mnemonic value, but the rest seemed slightly dubious. It wasn’t that the elder dragons were lying, or meant them ill—just that it was inevitable their memories would gradually change over such a vast amount of time, whether that meant their sharp edges were washed smooth by an ocean of recollections

or that they merged with each other.

In terms of intellect, the elder dragons should have had the capacity to master writing. And yet, they had no written language. Since they had individual symbols with which to identify themselves, it should have followed that they would have an alphabet...but they had one fatal flaw when it came to actually manipulating letters. Namely, their size. Even if the shapes of their hands and fingers had been suited to holding a writing implement, their size would dwarf any quill pen.

Why not just fashion a pen of suitable size?

There were simply no birds with feathers large enough to form the quill, and even if they were to carve a log, they had neither ink to dip it in nor paper to write upon. They could perhaps skin a whole sheep to make a sheepskin parchment, but elder dragons had neither the dexterity nor the desire to do so. After all, they were a brutish race who were used to relying on their absurd power in both magical and physical combat. And so, their lack of a written language was a function of their bodies, not their brains.

Sadly, words were necessary to make sure that future generations received the details of your messages clearly...

“How about something like this?”

“H-hm, yes, not bad...”

As thanks for the information they had shared, Mile had offered to carve the pinky nails on the elder dragons’ left hands.

This particular dragon seemed pleased at the result.

He was the lowest-ranking member of the group, and Mile had started with him, with the intention of collecting each dragon’s impressions and feedback on the result before moving on to the next individual. In light of this, it only made sense that the higher-ranking members should come later. While elder dragons had no sense of graphic design principles—mostly due to having never been exposed to such things, rather than a lack of ability to appreciate them—they were at least capable of forming impressions based on something good they

had seen and using that as the basis for criticism.

“I shall be next! I desire something a bit more subdued, with more gravitas. I’ll leave the details up to you, and I shan’t complain about the result.”

“Understood! Leave it to me!”

Mile would never complain about receiving general directions rather than specific ones. This was, in fact, the mark of an ideal customer. It made things much simpler for her, and as such, she was grateful for the elder dragons’ crude aesthetic sensibilities.

She got back to work. It took even her quite some time to carve one claw for eight different elder dragons, with each design made to order and more intricate than the last. Getting the job done without breaks for food and sleep would have been a tall order. Obviously, she couldn’t let any of these important dragons walk away with designs that were simpler or less deft than those she had given the dragon soldiers. It simply wouldn’t do for them to look any less dignified. Such was the reality of the dragon hierarchy.

Thankfully, the elder dragons were happy to wait while Mile worked, and the beastman was equally content to stay, gorging himself on the food that Pauline cooked with the ingredients Mile provided.

As she worked, Mile chatted with the dragons whose horns and talons she was carving, asking them all sorts of questions—not unlike a beautician at the salon making conversation with her clients.

“So,” she asked, “are your legends passed down in the elder dragon tongue? I’m wondering if there are any subtleties of meaning lost in translating them into human speech.”

“Hm? What are you saying? We share language with humans. In fact, our ancestors were likely taught by the humans how to speak.”

“Wha...? Oh, I see!”

If the elder dragons were originally creatures lacking language fluency, and if humans had boosted those creatures’ intelligence and given them the power of speech, it only stood to reason that they would have taught them human language. There was certainly no reason for the elder dragons to have bothered

devising their own.

Until now, Mile had assumed the elder dragons had been kind enough to learn human speech for the sake of communication. Apparently, she had been vastly mistaken.

After that, out of consideration for the elder dragons' pride, Mile stuck to more inoffensive topics of conversation, mixing in inquiries about things she wished to know about here and there. The dragons, usually starved for amusement, ate up Mile's entertaining stories of the human world and were happy to answer her questions in return, all of which only helped the exchange of information. While elder dragons looked down on humans, they also recognized that they had their purpose, albeit one very different from their own. Thus, there was no point in being cruel to them. It was not unlike the way that humans are happy to care for the cats that drive away mice or the dogs that help to round up sheep—and once humans begin to spend time with these animals, they grow fond of them. There were even stories about times when elder dragons had aided the humans they took a liking to or granted them scales.

Knowing these stories, the other members of the Crimson Vow weren't about to let such a valuable opportunity slip through their fingers. Unlike Mile, they had no concrete goals in mind, but an elder dragon who was considered an elder among their kind would have borne witness to centuries, perhaps even millennia, of history. Even if they had lived so long that their memories were falling out of sequence, they'd still know plenty of things humans might find useful. So they took this opportunity to approach the dragons who were still waiting their turn, or those who were already finished, and the dragons were happy to oblige them, as a human with some time on their hands might play with a little rabbit.

“Are there any special tricks to how beings as powerful as yourselves use magic?” asked Reina with uncharacteristic politeness. Apparently, even Reina could muster up a bit of courtesy if she was speaking to an elder dragon elder—one who might be able to teach her something she wanted to know! As Pauline would put it, “Lip service costs nothing.”

“Hm? I can’t say anything comes to mind... We elder dragons have simply been blessed by the gods.”

Useless... In another unusual turn, Reina managed the self-control to keep her frustration from showing—though the elder dragons would likely have been unable to read such nuance in a human expression, anyway.

“To our eyes, you are nothing more than hatchlings, still breaking from your shells. There’s no need to hurry when you are yet so very young. As I recall, humans consider fifteen years to be a coming of age. Looking at you, I would guess you are younger even than that. I have lived many years in my long life and would say I am quite skilled in discerning the age of humans. As such, I would wager I guessed yours accurately just now. Based on your appearance, your size, your manner of speech, and your intellect, I must be right on the mark. Humans are always so surprised, so very surprised when I am able to guess their age, thinking I would never be able to do so! Bwa ha ha! So, as for your exact age, I would say...eleven, no, twelve years old!”

“Who’s twelve?!?!”

There was a dull *thwunk* as Reina drove her right fist into the dragon’s side. Followed by...

“Gaaaaah!!!”

She gripped her right wrist with her left hand and screamed.

“Reina, you have to realize that you can’t just punch an elder dragon barehanded,” Pauline chided. “You aren’t Mile...”

She quickly set to healing Reina’s now wrecked fingers, wrist, and shoulder as the other girl writhed and grumbled. Apparently, she had not only managed to break a few fingers but sprained her wrist and screwed up her shoulder as well. Her whole hand was swollen from the wrist up, implying some sort of internal bleeding. Part of it was already beginning to purple into a deeper black.

Once Pauline’s magic had stopped the pain, and her arm had returned to its normal color, Reina continued to glare at the elder dragons, gritting her teeth. But really, she had brought this on herself. In fact, the dragon hadn’t even realized Reina had touched him, so his expression had not shifted in the

slightest.

There was no point in picking a fight here. This might be the only chance they ever had to speak to elder dragons like this. Most people would *never* have such an opportunity. And so, Reina continued asking questions of the dragons, as though nothing had ever happened.

Meanwhile, Pauline was in conversation with a different dragon. “Wise and honorable dragon,” she began, “would you happen to know the location of any gold or other precious metals that can be mined close to human settlements?”

A fastball right down home plate!!! Mile, Reina, and Mavis (the latter of whom had been trained in certain lingo by Mile’s folktales) all screamed internally.

Pauline’s question might be considered fair in light of the fact that there were certain types of dragons and birds who had a particular predilection for gathering shiny things. However...

“Gold? Are you speaking of the gold ore that humans use for their coinage? We do not use money, and we rarely do any mining. What use would we have for a metal that’s more fragile than iron?”

Elder dragons had no methods for mining or refining gold ore, since they did not use money or seem to have any need for gold at all. Naturally, they would have little interest in the metal.

Elder dragons are useless... Pauline internally spat.

“Great elder dragon,” said Mavis to yet another, “could I ask you to teach me what you understand to be your duties as a powerful individual and how the strong are to comport themselves?”

Naturally, her interests differed from those of Pauline or Reina. And, in fact, the elder dragon seemed a little bit impressed by Mavis’s question.

“My! Rather striking you are, for one so young. Very well. I shall teach you all I know!”

Mavis had asked this question thinking ahead to a time when she might be at her strongest, but of course, no elder dragon would imagine that a human—

especially a mere infant of not even twenty years—would have such things in mind. Humans perished and turned to dust without ever reaching anything approaching the strength of even a newborn elder dragon. Thus, the elder dragon assumed Mavis was asking for an insight into the mind of a great and powerful elder dragon, specifically, rather than thinking about anything she could achieve. The dragon also had come to another conclusion...

“Of course. Though you are but a weakling of a human, your heart rings different from that of those three females. Such a strong resolve for a weak creature must belong to a male of the species...”

“Huh?” Mavis was speechless. “But I-I’m a *woman*! A ‘*female*,’ as you put it!” Even if it was coming from an elder dragon, she could not overlook such a slight.

The elder dragon, perhaps realizing his error, swiftly turned his gaze away.

All of which was to say that, in the end, the four of them were successful in gathering some measure of information...

Much later...

The earth rumbled as eight elder dragons roared out in joy.

“That was quite the endeavor,” said the eldest elder dragon. **“We offer this as your reward.”**

He handed over a crystal the size of a softball.

“Some refer to this as a Dragon Orb. It has no great value to us, but we hear they have always been prized by humans. I’m sure it would fetch a decent price.”

Mile’s thoughts immediately drifted. *If you gather up eight dragons, she thought, and make a wish, you receive a Dragon Ball... No! Wait! That’s completely backwards!*

Reina, meanwhile, rushed to prop up Pauline, who had nearly collapsed on the spot. Apparently, a Dragon Orb was something *quite* valuable. Enough to knock Pauline off her feet...

“Perhaps we have tipped our hand too much today, but this forewarning of an ‘enemy’ invasion is quite valuable. It is a joyous thing that this meeting has turned out to be so beneficial to both parties. And fret not, we shall be whipping those youngsters into shape. Now then, fare thee well, you charming lesser life-fo—er, humans!”

“They’re gone.”

“They’ve gone now.”

“I think they’re gone.”

“It appears they are gone.”

The members of the Crimson Vow were in agreement: The dragons had departed. Even Pauline had seemingly recovered from her previous mental assault.

“I guess we didn’t get most of what we wanted from our dragon connections. They never told us why it was that they were going around investigating the ruins. But at least we can venture a pretty fair guess...”

Though they had asked many of the questions they wanted to, this hadn’t been an especially good haul, as far as information went. The elder dragons hadn’t really had much to offer them beyond sharing the legends that were passed down among their kind—which were little different from the myths told by the elves and dwarves and fairies. They had offered a few glimpses into the deeper secrets they held but, ultimately, only really managed to provide some small amendments to what Mile already knew.

Still, it had been fun to hear tales of what was, for humans, the distant past. The way the elder dragons spoke of the many historical events at which they had been idle spectators was fascinating... Honestly, those stories were way more entertaining than any of the legends. And the intel was *especially* valuable for Mile, at least in regard to her endeavors as Miami Satodele. Even the other three avidly took note of the tidbits they would pen in their own autobiographies once they became great heroes, A-rank hunters, or legendary merchants.

“Let’s go home,” Reina said.

“All right!!”

Though they had done no actual hunting on this trip, between the horn and nail shavings and the Dragon Orb, this was an unimaginable haul for two days’ work. Of course, they weren’t exactly hurting for money and loath to cause the stir that would result from a C-rank party presenting such bounty at the guild hall. So for now, these new treasures became nothing more than another entry in the ledger of Mile’s inventory.

“Oh!”

In the middle of dinner at the inn, Mile suddenly gasped.

“What’s up, Mile?” asked Mavis.

“I-It’s no...thing...”

Crap, she thought. I forgot something. Nanos!

YES, MA’AM!

Nanos, the captain of the extradimensional expedition unit told me that when they were returning home, they came from somewhere up in the sky, right? They also said that a metal golem—a robot—from the other side fell in with them! Could you retrieve it and scan its memory?

UNFORTUNATELY, IT SEEMS TO HAVE SUSTAINED MASSIVE DAMAGE DURING THE DESCENT. ITS MEMORY WAS WIPED, AND IT BURNED OUT ITS OWN CIRCUITS WHEN ITS POWER SOURCE OVERHEATED, CAUSING IT TO SELF-DESTRUCT. IT FELL INTO THE OCEAN, AND THE FRAGMENTS ARE NOW IN A DEEP TRENCH... EVEN IF WE WERE TO RETRIEVE THEM, THEY WOULD BE NOTHING MORE THAN WORTHLESS METAL SHARDS.

Ah, of course. Guess it couldn’t be that easy...

Sadly, Mile’s sudden mid-meal brain wave was all for naught. Obviously, this directly concerned the safety of this world, so if the robot *had* retained any data, the nanomachines surely would have made Mile aware of this right away. The fact that they hadn’t done so had to mean the path was well and truly a dead end.

IN SUCH MATTERS, IT IS OUR POLICY TO ACCOMMODATE YOUR WISHES AS MUCH AS THE RULES ALLOW, LADY MILE, BUT WE ARE FORBIDDEN FROM ANY SPONTANEOUS, PROACTIVE INTERFERENCE WITH EXTRADIMENSIONAL WORLDS OR THEIR CIVILIZATIONS OR INHABITANTS. AS SUCH, WE CANNOT OPERATE AS YOU WOULD IMAGINE, OUTSIDE OF ACTIONS SUCH AS ANALYZING CORPSES OR FULLY DEFUNCT ARTIFICIAL LIFE-FORMS. WE CANNOT GET INVOLVED OUTSIDE OF LAUNCHING ATTACKS IN THE FORM OF MAGIC, OR ACT AT ALL ACCORDING TO OUR OWN WILL OR INTENTIONS... OUR APOLOGIES.

It's all right, you're just acting as God—er, your creator directed. Don't worry about it!

.....

Somewhere, an aged, weary-looking elder dragon peered intently out from a cloak of shadow. This dragon's horns were adorned with elaborate carvings, and a marking of the same pattern was carved into the pinky nail of his left hand.

"Such is the way of things," he boomed. **"You defied our orders and sealed your own fate."**

Another dragon let out a growl of resentment at this elder, who was being waited upon by a young female dragon, her face only half-visible from the shadows.

This particular dragon had seen the sudden rise in popularity the elite soldiers and committee members had enjoyed after receiving their cool carvings. He had been attempting to coerce the soldiers into revealing the identity of the carver so that he might be decorated as well. However, the soldiers had been commanded by their leaders never to bother said carver again, which meant they had to refuse. (Of course, Kragon, at least, had extracted a promise that he could have his horns carved later.)

"Well," this particular dragon had decided, **"if they won't tell me who the carver is, I'll just do the carving myself."**

Surely, if a lowly life-form like a human could accomplish such a thing, a great and powerful elder dragon could as well. And so he had set at once to the task...

“No way! The teeth will never get through!” said the man with the saw.

At first, the elder dragon had commanded the aid of demons and beastmen, but none of them had the requisite strength to carve an elder dragon’s nail or horn. Next, they attempted to have several people operate the tools at once, but that only succeeded in breaking their saw.

It should have been obvious that no ordinary saw, operated by either demon or beastman, could harm an elder dragon. Even a well-muscled warrior with a massive sword couldn’t make a single dent in an elder dragon. It was only because Mile was working with an entirely different set of tools that she was able to accomplish this.

Plus, the designs that the demons and beastmen had drawn for him were absolutely hideous.

“Ugh. Enough! I was a fool to ever pin my hopes on such lowly life-forms!”

With no other options, he decided it was time to take matters into his own hands...but the design he came up with himself was even worse. Still, it was too late to back down. He carved his own nails and horns. The result of which was...

“Bwa ha ha ha ha ha!!!”

His nails were chipped and uneven. His horns were not only warped and jagged, but it seemed he had underestimated his own strength during the carving, because the tip of one of them had been snapped clear off.

Some laughed, while others pitied him too much to do so, turning away with their shoulders shaking. All the while, the self-made victim merely wallowed in his despair. He had become an object of ridicule in the eyes of the other dragons, who had been gussied up by Mile, and could now only stare from his darkened corner...

“This blows! Every time I think I’m really gettin’ into it with a lady, we lock eyes with some ancient creep staring at us from the shadows, and it totally

kills the mood! The ladies just scream and run away!”

The other dragons were unimpressed.

Hearing their words, the councilor was outraged. He had already lived more than eighty percent of his life but still had some centuries left to go. He wasn't old enough to be considered *decrepit*.

“I mean, this is all your own fault... Plus, horns and nails grow back if you remove them. It's your own fault if you're too cowardly to do it just because it'll hurt!”

Indeed, if an elder dragon lost a horn or talon, they would simply grow back in. The horns were not attached to the skull and would regrow themselves, a bit like a deer's antlers. They did not shed and grow back every season like antlers, but if broken, they would reform from the root. Though it was unclear whether they were naturally built this way or if the nanomachines simply did the rebuilding for them when necessary.

The talons were the same and could reliably grow back if lost. In fact, Mile had only agreed to do her engravings in the first place because of this, knowing the dragons would be all right in a worst-case scenario. She would never have agreed to the arrangement so readily if damaged horns and nails might never grow back again.

Clearly, the unfortunate dragon would have been better off removing his nails and horns. But doing so would cause him a great deal of pain, and he would be stuck looking rather unseemly until they grew back in, so he had yet to work up the courage. In other words, he was a wimp. This cowardice was probably inevitable—after all, it was normally unthinkable for elder dragons to sustain grave injuries, which meant most were strangers to pain, easily frightened by rumors of how agonizing such an amputation could be.

“It's just too sad. Perhaps we should let him go with the warriors when they —”

“Never! That would mean bending the rules, and if we were to set such a precedent, we'd have droves of fools coming out of the woodwork and

similarly maiming themselves in hopes of the same outcome!”

“Very true. The results could be devastating. Then they would get more popular with the ladies and...”

Apparently, having these carvings was something of a god-tier cheat code.

“Anyway, we have a greater problem at hand.”

“Yes?”

“The females have been clamoring that they wish to get carvings, too... We cannot even entertain the notion.”

“Isn’t it your old woman who’s leading that charge?”

“And your daughter and granddaughter who are following in her footsteps!”

“Now now, let’s not get too agitated...”

“Why are you talking like this isn’t your problem?! Don’t forget your sister was yelling at the committee just yesterday!”

“I already apologized for that! And anyway, isn’t the biggest issue here that the chief’s daughter is getting in on this?!”

It seemed like the pitiful dragon with his botched carvings was probably out of luck.

Chapter 106: On the Road

“ICE BULLET!”

Ka-shunk!

“That should be the last one. Did we miss any?”

“All clear. The only other monsters in the vicinity are jackalopes.”

“Let’s go ahead and store them away then.”

After Monika conducted a thorough sweep of the area with her search magic, Marcela nodded and stored the four orcs that the three girls had felled in her inventory. The end result would be the same no matter who stored them, but the task typically was left to Marcela, as one never knew who might be watching. It had been recently decided that she would be in charge of all storage, and it only made sense to stick to that decision to ward against negligence or other mistakes.

Of course, there were certain instances in which it would be permissible for Monika or Aureana to use the inventory as well, such as when it was completely safe or when they could come up with an easy excuse. Crisis would hardly strike if they were to take a spark canteen or a piece of fruit out of it while walking down a city street with no one else in sight.

“Now then, shall we retreat?”

“Let’s. Goodness, though, this inventory—er, ‘storage magic’—really has helped our earnings. We don’t have to worry about having to draw from our account back at the capital in case of emergencies anymore,” said Monika, quickly correcting herself on the terminology midsentence.

This, too, was a necessity. If they didn’t make a habit of using the right terms, there was no telling when they might slip up and say the wrong thing. Referring to this ability as an “inventory” was permissible only when the three of them were alone, and only when it was absolutely necessary, such as if they were

honing or otherwise researching the skill.

“Yes. Now we don’t have to risk using the usual money transfer procedures. Of course, it’s doubtful the Guild would give up any hunters’ secrets too easily, but when you’re dealing with royalty, it’s better to be safe than sorry,” Aureana agreed.

Normally, carrying four entire orcs from the forest back into town would be too tall an order even for ten-odd full-grown men. Hunting orcs was not so difficult a task in and of itself, but no matter how many you might bag, the extermination reward was small compared to the effort involved in transporting them. Plus, the most profitable part of the orcs was their meat, and only a fragment of that could safely be transported back by a small party, which meant that orc-hunting didn’t typically make much financial sense. Of course, with a larger group to carry the meat, one could earn more, but that also meant dividing the pay between those extra people, so the benefits were moot.

As you may surmise, the Wonder Trio had now unlocked the secrets to the Crimson Vow’s earning potential.

“All Miss Adele has ever done is aid and bless us, ever since our days at the Academy. We came to see her to express our gratitude for all she had done for us before, only to be given more. Between the cleaning and washing magic and the inven—*storage magic*—we simply must do something for her in return...” Marcela looked troubled.

“And then there’s the matter of our power levels!” Aureana interjected.

The other two fell silent.

Since their last reunion with Mile, all three of them had seen their magical ability increase exponentially for no identifiable reason. Mile had taught them all kinds of new spells, but “Ways to Increase Your Magical Potential” had not been among them, nor had she hinted at anything that might explain this change. However, given the timing and the assuredly extraordinary nature of the phenomenon, the trio could not rule out the possibility that their friend Mile was involved.

“This is certainly her doing, but she would never admit it. Which means...”

“That’s our Adele.”

“That is our Adele...”

Collectively, they let out a sigh.

The Wonder Trio.

In the kingdom of Brandel, Mile’s home country, there was a school where she had studied for nearly a year before her departure, back while she still had a somewhat “average” life. The school was one attended mainly by the sons and daughters of lesser nobles and wealthier commoners: Eckland Academy. There, Mile had made her first-ever friends in this life or the one before.

The first was Marcela, the third daughter of an impoverished baron, who had all the trappings of a noble villainess but turned out to be a kind and upstanding young lady. The second was Monika, the cheerful daughter of a middling merchant. And the third was Aureana, who came from rural farmer stock but was an exceptional student admitted on scholarship. (She was the most serious and unassuming of the three, but she was also the sharpest and would propose the most wicked of schemes if it was for the sake of her friends.)

It was out of both obligation to and affection for Mile—or as they knew her, Adele—that the three girls had honed their skills and set off on their own journey. Adele had done so much for them: had taught them absurd, almost cheat-level magical tricks and saved them from a horrid fate in the form of some political marriage. They longed to travel alongside her—as well as avoid any unwanted proposals thereafter.

Unlike Adele, the three of them were possessed of wisdom and common sense...emphasis on the *were*, that is. Past tense.

Yes, once upon a time, the members of the trio *were* sensible individuals.

And then, they met Adele...

Ding-a-ling!

“We’re the Wonder Trio, here on a training journey! Pleased to make your

acquaintance!”

At the sound of the doorbell, the girls gave a congenial greeting, only to be met with silence from the room.

They were a party of but three young girls, who could not possibly be C-rank. Even if they somehow had risen to that level—possible only if they were magical prodigies or the daughters of master swordsmen, trained from infancy and allowed to skip ranks at their registration—they still wouldn’t be old enough to travel away from home. Plus, between their equipment and their looks, it was clear the three of them were lacking in combat ability. It wasn’t that they weren’t attractive, but simply that their physique, musculature, and the way they carried themselves did not exactly signal strength.

The trio strolled up to the exchange counter, ignoring the persistent silence in the room. By now, they were used to this sort of reaction.

“We’d like to turn in some goods for one of the daily requests.”

Things like medicinal herbs, meat, and pelts were in regular demand at most any guild branch, so there was no need to confirm a specific request for them beforehand. It was typical to hunt or gather these while on the road and sell them at one’s next destination—though this kind of business was normally limited to small amounts of valuable herbs or rare ingredients or, occasionally, small animals hunted just before arriving in town. It was too difficult to carry anything else in addition to the typical encumbrances of travel.

“S-sure...”

Due to the building’s structure, larger items were received beside the reception counter in the guild’s main building and then taken out through the back to the processing area, with herbs and the like simply turned in at the exchange counter. From his post, the wide-eyed exchange clerk gestured for the trio to present whatever they had, however...

Bam! Bam! Ba-bam!

The exchange clerk, the other guild employees, and the other hunters in the hall all fell even more deeply silent as four orcs appeared out of thin air. Unable to hold their reaction in, the onlookers all cried, ***“They’re just like the Crimson***

Vow!!!”

Sure enough, this guild branch was in a town that was situated along the main highway through Vanolark, the kingdom to the west of Brandel, and so the Crimson Vow had already stampeded on through.

“Well, I suppose it makes things easier on us that Miss Adele’s party already passed by. We’re less of a spectacle that way...”

As Marcela suggested, things seemed to go much more smoothly for them in the towns that had already been graced by the Crimson Vow’s presence. In other cities, the trio were faced with cries of, “St-storage magic?! And she can hold so much!” and “Please join our party!” While they were certainly still oddities in places like this, for some reason, hardly anyone ever bothered them. It probably had something to do with the vague alarm lingering in everyone’s eyes...

After a brief chat with the exchange clerk and a few conversations with other guild staff about the local monsters, the trio left the guild hall behind. In the meantime...

“Those girls—” a man said to his companions. “They ain’t like the Crimson Vow. They’re all just soft little kids who don’t know nothin’ about the world, I’m guessin’. If we could take ’em in and get a hold of that crazy storage magic, then get them to do as we—”

One of his party members shook his head wildly.

“No, listen. In that Wonder Trio, they’ve got an airheaded little girl with storage magic, a busty girl with a nice face but who seems like she’s pretty cold deep down, and a happy, chatty girl, right?”

“Y-yeah? What about it?”

“I’m just sayin’, they remind me of the Crimson Vow... Except they don’t have a sweet leader like Mavis who keeps the other members in check. Which means...”

“THERE’S NO ONE TO PULL THE BRAKES WHEN THE TRAIN GOES OFF THE

RAILS!!!

Everyone in the guild hall went pale, and silence fell again.

“Plus, the Crimson Vow have at least a swordswoman and a magic knight... whatever the hell kind of job that’s supposed to be. Anyway, there’s two vanguard fighters. The Trio are all mages. They have no vanguard, and they’re weak, with no physical defenses. Just three little girls. *Nothing more*... Is that even possible? Do you all seriously believe they could survive as hunters like that without getting totally annihilated?”

Everyone shook their heads in unison.

“That’s right. It’s impossible. *Normally*, it’d be completely impossible! Yet the three of them are alive and healthy, not a single scratch on them. Which means...”

There was a sound of audible gulping.

“They ain’t normal.”

Shock, amazement, and then resigned acceptance crossed the faces of everyone present.

“That’s right. They’re probably even *more* dangerous than the Crimson Vow. No mistaking it.”

Once more, the guild was silent on both sides of the reception counter.

Later, upon hearing about the Wonder Trio through his staff, the guild master issued an edict that no one was to ever meddle with these girls...

“Honestly, though, what *did* Miss Adele’s party do at all of these guild branches?”

“*Who knows...*”



Chapter 107: The Beast Village

“**W**E STILL HAVEN’T BEEN to a demon or beastfolk village,” Mile muttered, lying on her bed in the party’s room at the inn.

“What are you on about this time?” Reina asked wearily. A typical exchange.

“Well, I mean, we’ve been to a dwarven village and an elven village, and I was alone at the time, but I at least met all the inhabitants of a fairy village...”

“But we’ve met plenty of beastfolk. Like at that excavation site—”

“No, but that wasn’t their *settlement*, it was just a work site! That doesn’t count!”

“Why is that not enough for you?” asked Reina.

Before Mile could even respond, Mavis and Pauline chimed in unison, “*Because there were no little beastgirls there!*”

Mile nodded, arms folded.

“Are you stupid?!”

Mile’s lower lip jutted out. “I would like to pay a visit to one of the two...” she said.

The others were silent, so she continued.

“I do hate to pass up on any possible opportunity, and Reina, Mavis—you two received invitations to the demon village, so I was thinking that would be our first stop.”

“*Since when?!*” the two protested.

“Come on! Don’t you remember that demon girl?”

The two thought back. The demon girl they met *had* said something to the effect of extending Reina an invitation. And Mavis had received a more formal invitation from one of the men she had faced off against in battle.

Still, the pair were agreed.

“No way!”

“No how!”

“Whyyy?” Mile whined.

“Do you even know where the demon village is?” asked Reina.

“Um. Well, I figured we’d just look around some nearby villages...”

“Of course,” the others sighed.

“Listen,” Reina explained. “The places where humanoids live—humans, elves, and dwarves, that is—are fairly integrated. But that isn’t the case with beastfolk and demons. We aren’t on the best of terms with them. I mean, they do have pretty much equal rights with humanoids these days, and at least ostensibly our people are friendly with theirs, so it’s not as if you don’t ever see some of them coming to human towns on business, or even occasionally to take up residence for some reason or other. But those cases are exceedingly rare. Most of them keep their distance and live in isolated, homogeneous groups.

“On the humanoid side, the casualties in the wars of the past were mostly soldiers and mercenaries—people who knowingly left their homes to face danger—and that was only for a very short time, while the fighting was still going on. However, all beastfolk and demons, including women and children, have faced centuries—millennia even—of enslavement and murder. So, whatever resentment humanoids hold towards them is nothing compared to the anger they hold towards us... Mile, would *you* ever want to live among a group who not only viciously slaughtered your forefathers but who even now resents your very existence? And raise a child there, no less?”

Mile shook her head hard. You’d have to be a masochist to wish for such a life.

“Mile, the only reason we haven’t faced much backlash so far is because we haven’t encountered any elders and because we’re all young ladies, and powerful ones at that,” Mavis added. “Demon and beastfolk elders tend to have particularly negative feelings regarding humanoids, though things usually go more smoothly with younger folks, who never experienced that darker part of

history firsthand. That said, I should point out that means things only go *more* smoothly, not that they go *well*.

“Regardless of race or species, everyone finds children cute and wishes to protect them. Mile, you’d have trouble killing a baby jackalope or kobold, even if it is a monster, right? Demons and beastfolk seem to feel that even more fervently than humans do. Plus, they deeply respect strength. As such, our being not only women but also young is a direct appeal to their instincts, to their desire to protect. At the same time, because we’ve crushed them in battle, we benefit from their respect for a strong opponent. For both of these reasons, it’s hard for them to bear ill will towards us.

“It may sound contradictory, but it’s precisely because we put up a fight from the very start that they were so cordial towards us. If we hadn’t fought them—if we had welcomed them with open arms—they likely would not have done the same in return. This is why I’m certain we’d face a lot of resistance from their elders, who dislike humans *and* have never fought us. Especially beastfolk, who are rather simple in their manner. As for the demons...”

The other three sighed.

“That’s not all.” Now it was Pauline’s turn. “Beastfolk typically live in small villages in forested regions remote from humans—similar to the elves. That doesn’t mean that they’re *extremely* far away from humans but just that they live in a certain part of human territories, rather than establishing their own kingdoms. Not that they pay any *taxes*...

“Anyway, the demons, on the other hand, live far, far from here in the northernmost parts of the continent, protected from human lands by the mountains that run between there and here. The range isn’t entirely impassable, but it’s intensely difficult to traverse by cart, so it’s quite rare that anyone—even the most adventurous young merchant—attempts it without extraordinarily good reason. Plus, they have incredible defensive measures set up to protect against traffickers and anti-demon zealots. Anyone who approaches with a weapon is captured and disarmed on sight. If you swear to turn back, you’ll be released, but only with enough food and water to just barely make it back home...unarmed, naturally.”

“There’s no way anyone could survive traveling through the mountains unarmed! Forget orcs and ogres, you could be taken out by goblins or kobolds, or even just a particularly nasty swarm of jackalopes!” Reina spat.

Pauline nodded.

“That’s why no one goes there.”

“Oh...”

One could surmise that demons might have an interest in weapons, armor, and food of humanoid make, but if they wanted them *that* badly, they could travel to a human settlement to make a purchase. No one would blatantly turn down their coin, and many demons were close enough to humans in appearance that they could simply cover their horns with a hat or their hair, in order to complete their errands without incident.

“So, I guess that means we start with a beastfolk village. There must be a nice village around here somewhere...” Mile muttered.

“Since when did we decide we were even going to do any of this?!” cried Reina. Mavis and Pauline could only chuckle in defeat.

As usual.

“So, here’s the beastfolk village I found,” said Mile the next day, pointing to some kind of map...

“How are you this persistent?!”

“We’ll take this one!”

Two days later, Mile stood before the other members of the Crimson Vow, a job request slip from the guild’s bulletin board in her outthrust hand. The edges were far more ragged than her usual clean tears. Her expression was calm, but something seemed off. Her eyes were swimming and her nose twitching.

Puzzled by this, the other three nevertheless looked upon the slip and read:

“Subjugation Request. Target: Band of Slave Traffickers. Client: Village of

Talican (Beast Tribe Village).”

“No surprise here,” the other members of the Crimson Vow sighed.

“Why would they ask humanoids to do a job like this, though? Aren’t beastfolk usually pretty proud of their own skills? There’s something weird about them sending this job through a humanoid guild.”

“Well, you see...” interjected an older hunter who had been listening in on the conversation, “taking beastfolk as slaves is in direct violation of the basic principles of the treaty that was ratified at the end of the Demi-human Wars. So there’s no reason for them to shed their own blood to put a stop to this. Basically, they’re demanding we take responsibility.”

“Huh? But the job came from—”

“Well, they were the ones who would’ve lodged the complaint with our lord, and they are the ones who have the best knowledge of the situation. It only follows that they’d be the best people to speak to the hunters who take on the task, but given the circumstances, it’s going to be our side who’s paying for it. Which explains why the pay isn’t great.”

“Ah...” the members of the Crimson Vow sighed.

“Of course, the slavers aren’t from this fief or even this country. As soon as they get what they’re after, they’re gonna scam right back over the border. Makes sense. No nobles or royals are gonna put up with somethin’ like that. If they caught these guys, they’d beat ’em down with everything they have. Far as folks from other countries are concerned, though, it’s none of their business. ’Course, they wouldn’t overlook anything that might cause a repeat of the Demi-human Wars—even the beastfolk know this is just a simple criminal justice matter, nothing on a national level—so things won’t move that far up the chain.

“That’s why the rulers of other countries act like they don’t even know stuff like this is happening. Fights croppin’ up in other places just weakens those places and puts *them* at an advantage. Some of those nobles and other rich folks might even buy up the enslaved beastfolk themselves... I mean, I guess cat and rabbit and fox girls *are* pretty—*eeek!*”

“Is thaaaaaat soooooooooo?”

“Ah,” the other members of the Crimson Vow sighed as a demonic voice creaked from Mile’s throat.

Ah, thought the rest of those assembled.

While Mile stood there trembling with rage, Mavis headed straight to the reception desk.

“We’ll take this one.”



At this juncture, all in the hall—the Crimson Vow, the guild clerks, and the other hunters—were on the same page with respect to these criminals:

They are so dead!

“So we’ve accepted the job, yeeees...?” Mile creaked.

The other three nodded furiously, paling. Obviously, Mile’s mood had yet to improve.

“Y-yep! Let’s get going!!!” Reina cut in, to more fervent nodding from Mavis and Pauline.

“We’re finally here!”

Mile’s mood had vastly improved. It wasn’t that she’d put aside her anger towards the slavers or kidnappers or whatever you wished to call these despicable criminals, but her joy at finally laying eyes upon the fluffy promised land—the cutie kemonomimi paradise!—had far surpassed her earlier rage.

“Now then, where’s our guide...?”

There was no way the beastfolk village would be undefended, particularly under these circumstances. Without first arranging a guide to take you through, you could be set upon by spears or arrows or stones without any warning. Plus, there were probably traps and other means of throwing travelers off from the real path. They might purposely make the real path narrow and the branching paths wider, have the straightest road be a fake while the real one was thin and meandering, create optical illusions with false trees and similarly cut stumps to make someone think they were walking in circles, or employ other tricks to make one lose one’s sense of direction...and so forth. Therefore, the guild had sent word ahead that the Crimson Vow would need a guide.

“Oh! There you ar—*wait, it’s you!*”

“Oh...” the girls sighed. The guide that was sent out to meet them turned out to be a familiar face. “*You were with the elder dragons...*”

It was the same beastman who had guided them previously.

“Guess this is kind of your full-time job, huh?”

“Mile, don’t be rude! Just because it’s a lowly job doesn’t mean you need to judge—” Somehow Mavis had blundered her way into something even ruder than what Mile had said.

“Shut up!”

They hadn’t meant anything by it, truly, but manners were not the Crimson Vow’s strong suit.

“If you need someone to act as an adjunct in a place close to the capital, then obviously you’d appoint someone who lives around here! Plus, I’m expertly familiar with the areas around the capital, a master huntsman, used to traveling and camping on my own, and I can fell or escape from any monster. I’m the ideal choice! I’m here because I was the best candidate, not because being a tour guide is all I’m capable of! I can do anything! And this time, we’re gonna be on *my* turf! *Hff, hff, hff...*”

The beastman seemed rather riled up. Apparently, their words had wounded him.

“Whatever,” he continued. “I know you’re all pretty strong. Just don’t overdo it. The elder dragons warned me about what you four can do, so I know what you’re hiding up those frilly sleeves!”

Normally this was the point where the Crimson Vow should have protested, but they seemed to have developed some self-awareness and opted to remain silent.

“Here we are.”

After being guided along a road filled with so many tricks and traps that they could likely have never followed it on their own, the Crimson Vow arrived at the beastfolk’s village.

I probably could have gotten here on my own, Mile thought. I would have just searched from the air or followed the scent...

Just then, Reina elbowed Mile, grinning. “I’ll bet you could have gotten here on your own by following your wicked desires. ‘I smell little beastgirls this way!’”

“H-how’d you know what I was thinking...?”

The other members of the party just laughed. “How could we not?!”

Mile truly was an open book.

The village was not surrounded by a fence. Rather, the narrow forest path simply came to the edge of a settlement, where they were greeted by a beastman of some years.

“Excellent work. I’ll take it from here.”

This seemed to be a village official, the one who would actually be explaining the job to the Crimson Vow. The hunter’s job was now complete. The fact that he had been waiting here for the Vow’s arrival likely meant that there were various guards surrounding the village on the lookout for slavers or monsters, who would have spotted the hunters and made their presence known.

“The Guild wrote to us about you four. We don’t prefer to put women and children out on the battlefield, but we do make exceptions, and we have no complaints if the men of other races would like to fall back and push the women to the front lines. Each race is welcome to do as they please. We judge only the strength and courage of those who set foot upon the battlefield. I sincerely hope that the humans have not conspired to send us weak pawns to be discarded. For both your sake and this country’s.”

The hunter who had led the Crimson Vow to the village was still lingering around the area. Overhearing this, he began frantically waving his hands in front of his fellow beastman’s face to signal that this official should stop immediately. However, the man simply continued his lecture, glaring at the Crimson Vow and seeming not to notice. The four young hunters, meanwhile, just watched the official, stone-faced.

Among the beastfolk, only the hunter—who had been warned by the elder dragons—knew not to mess with the Crimson Vow.

“Why didn’t you say so sooner?!?!”

The village official had assumed from the presence of this group of rookie female hunters—some of them children, no less—that the humans were disregarding the beastfolk’s complaints, or rather, warnings. Hence the snide lecture, which was interrupted by the huntsman grabbing him by the arm and dragging him several meters away. Just as he was about to chide the huntsman for his impudence, the huntsman filled him in on the full situation, at which point the official let out a cry.

“S-so these girls,” he sputtered, “are the ones the elder dragons acknowledged as their superiors, the ones that *they* said not to mess with? The-the...”

“Yep. The Crimson Vow.”

“Whaaaha...?”

Not only had the humans *not* disregarded the village’s troubles, but they had also offered up their strongest fighting force. The official was stunned to learn this. He swiftly ran back to the Crimson Vow.

“Thank you for coming. Welcome to the village!”

Exactly what have people been saying about us?!?! the Crimson Vow wondered silently. The beastman’s change of heart had been suspiciously swift...

“...And that’s about the sum of it.”

The Crimson Vow traveled to the home of the village chief for a more complete explanation of the job ahead of them. Their guide seemed to have taken them on the scenic route through the village, likely to buy the huntsman time to run ahead and explain to everyone there who was coming. By the time they had arrived, they found a spread of sweets that must have counted as very fancy to the villagers waiting for them. Such a reception would normally be unthinkable for a group of hunters who had been dispatched to clean up the

humans' own messes—especially a group of young girls.

Picking up on this, the members of the Crimson Vow nibbled politely on these classy sweets, paying no mind to the slightly forlorn looks upon the villagers' faces...

“So, the slavers or kidnappers or whatever have started targeting only young children?”

This was the gist of the explanation they had just received.

Apparently, the evildoers had at first been focusing on young men and women, ones who would be immediately fit for work—whether it be outside or inside the home—but lately, they had redirected their attention only to those of very tender years. The reason for this was simple: On the whole, beastfolk over a certain age tended to value the safety of their kin over their own lives. Therefore, if they determined they had no chance of escape, captured beastfolk would take the most drastic course of action, sacrificing themselves to protect the lives of their people... In other words, they would stage a suicide attack in order to take out the villains.

Once sold, they might wait for an opportunity to murder their buyers. And not just the buyers, but their wives and children, their guests, and anyone the beastfolk could get their hands on...

Even without weapons, there were many ways they could accomplish this. They might, for instance, feign docility until their captors let their guards down, then plunge their fingers into their kidnappers' eyes to claw out their brains or slice their carotid arteries with shards of a broken dish. They could set fire to the humans' homes at night, mix something poisonous into their food or secretly drag their captors' meals across the floor in the hopes of inducing illness.

Whether or not they were successful, if caught, the beastfolk would immediately confess. They would say, “The people who captured and sold me took my family hostage and ordered me to do this.” Nobles and other wealthy individuals, who had many enemies, would assume the slavers had been hired by some opposing faction. Their retaliation would be swift, and the slavers—whom the nobles now believed had been attempting to assassinate them—

would be captured and tortured until they revealed the names of their employers...

Following the grisly deaths of a number of slavers, those who remained were forced to change their methods. Young children, who had yet to be taught such means of resistance, were a much safer bet. They couldn't be forced immediately into hard labor but could be kept as pets, and still provided the benefit of the status that came with having a beastperson for a slave. And regardless, they grew up quickly. A few years of having to rear them was a fair price to pay for the obedient slave one would have after beating the proper mentality into them. They could still do other work during that time, and if you only fed them the necessary minimum, it wasn't particularly costly, either.

This was about the sum of things.

"So based on how long it's been since the last attacks, we can expect them to be showing their faces again fairly soon," Reina concluded as the village chief finished speaking. Her face twitched as she tried to ignore Mile, who was again muttering eerily to herself.

"But from what they're telling us, they were able to drive a lot of these kidnappers to ruin in the past but not root them out entirely. So, even if we catch all the ones that show up this time, other folks will just take up their enterprise," Pauline pointed out.

"You can keep catching the criminals, but it's just one big game of whack-a-mole," Reina agreed.

"Plus, their methods are getting even more dastardly. They're kidnapping and brainwashing children!" Mavis cried. "Take an adult—even if they're enslaved, they'll still have their pride and principles as beastfolk and might attain freedom one day. But if one is taken from a young age and brainwashed... Not to mention that if all the children are taken, the village will die out!"

"And also," Reina continued, "no matter how many of these perpetrators we catch, there will always be others to take their place as long as there's good money to be made. Even if we come up with a countermeasure, they've already shown themselves to be pretty wily, given the way they switched things up to start targeting kids. We can expect the criminals to keep coming up with ways

to circumvent whatever they are against. They might even just capture the entire village and start breeding them, like some kind of ‘beastfolk ranch’...”

When you looked at it that way, the village’s future looked bleak. If nothing was done, the peril they were in would only increase with each passing year.

“Well then...” Mile muttered. “We just have to find a way to make this an unappealing target...”

The other three shrieked. Her face looked downright demonic.

“Now then, time to execute—the task at hand!” said Mile, quickly correcting herself midsentence. Her expression remained far more suited to what she had started to say than what she had landed upon. “Execute” was one of those words that carried very different meanings depending on its context... particularly when it came to the well-being of what—or rather, *who*—it was referring to.

“Anyway, I’m going to run a wide area search for the enemies. If there are any currently approaching, I’ll know right away.”

Mile’s search magic was already incredible both in terms of its accuracy and its effective range. And yet, she’d specifically called this a “wide area” search.

We’ll know the moment any of these criminals even set foot in this forest, won’t we? the others thought.

At this point, it probably wasn’t even a matter of distance. Mile’s most powerful search magic could likely extend far beyond the forest, but it simply wouldn’t be all that useful once it left the trees, as it would pick up all kinds of human life that might or might not have anything to do with the criminals.

The other members of the Crimson Vow could tell she was really going all out. Furthermore, they knew there was no stopping her. The moment anyone entered the forest, they would be picked up by Mile’s search magic, after which she would track their positions and know at once if anyone was acting suspiciously. The movement patterns of kidnappers would not resemble those of hunters who came into the woods on business, nor those of any local villagers, so she would be able to distinguish them without even seeing them—

well before they even reached this village's location.

There was no need to keep a lookout, much less do any scouting missions.

Seeing the shift in Mile's demeanor, Mavis and Pauline looked to Reina, curious.

"Okay, fine! But just this once! I know that 'cheating' is against our principles, but we can't stop her when she's like this, and if any of those kidnappers harm even a single hair on those children's heads..."

"It's the Eternal Force Blizzard for him!!!" the three cried—the name of a very deadly spell from one of Mile's tales.

"Seems they've arrived..."

The Crimson Vow had spent a leisurely several days in the beastfolk village: resting their bones, playing with the children; running searches, playing with the children; hunting high-ranking, lucrative monsters around the village and playing with the children. But finally, their true target was in sight.

Incidentally, they had decided to forgo collecting any medicinal herbs or other valuable ingredients. With Mile's search magic active, they would have picked the whole place dry and caused a lot of trouble for the village, so despite Pauline's vehement protests, Reina and Mavis decided those activities were off-limits. Mile, naturally, had no objections to this, leaving Pauline to sulk alone.

"These insolent whelps dare tread upon my moment of bliss?! They shall face my wrath!"

Mile seemed to have already forgotten the original objective of their mission. Unsurprising, given that she had been more or less allowed free rein, with none of the adults attempting to stop her from playing with the children (primarily out of political considerations). She soon got carried away, shouting, "So many little boys and girls! It's a kemonomimi paradise!" and other such ridiculous sentiments.

As a matter of practice, Mile always had in her inventory a stash of cat food, silver tail fronds, bird feed, and candies to give to any beastfolk children she

encountered. She was always prepared for what she called “a fated encounter,” and presently, that supply of candies was being utilized to the fullest.

She had also provided plenty of sweets for the adults as well. It was essentially a bribe so they wouldn’t complain about her playing with the children, but she had also felt at least a little guilty about how greedily the Crimson Vow had chowed down on the snacks that the villagers had provided them on their arrival, especially seeing as how said snacks seemed to be quite a luxury for the village. The Crimson Vow could buy as many sweets as they wanted at any time, and if Mile put her mind to it, she could even make some herself. The fact that they had eaten so many of the treats these villagers rarely got to sample weighed on her.

At any rate, the children flocked to her, begging her for candy, and Mile was in heaven. She could never forgive anyone who would interrupt such bliss for her. As a result, Mile was angry at these perpetrators not so much because they were kidnappers but, rather, because they were intruding upon her “fluffy paradise.”

Pity for the kidnappers, really.

“Their movements are clearly not those of someone hunting or gathering. They’re moving directly towards the village. These are our targets, no mistake. I’m sure the villagers will soon pick up on them via their own surveillance, but if any fighting breaks out, the beastfolk will get hurt, so let’s remind them not to engage anyone they spot.”

“Roger!”

They had already made the necessary arrangements ahead of time, through the village chief and council members, but many of the beastfolk were impulsive and short-tempered. It was very likely some of the watchmen would completely forget their instructions and attack the kidnappers on sight. So, Mavis headed at once to the chief’s home—not because she was the designated errand girl but because it only made sense to send the oldest, most respectable looking member of the Crimson Vow, who also happened to be the party leader—to speak alone to the highest-ranking individual in the village. Truth be told, if any of the others had taken the role from her, she would have

been super bummed.

They still had plenty of time before the kidnappers would arrive—too much, perhaps. They had far more time than needed to get word out to the watchmen, before it was time for the Crimson Vow to make their debut...

“Hm? What is that?”

Eight men walked through the woods. The man walking at the head of the group stopped. The other men followed suit.

Weeeeeh, weeeeh!

“Sounds like...crying?” the man muttered suspiciously. “Two children...or should I say two kits?”

Upon determining that the sound was that of two beastgirls crying, the leader sneered wickedly.

“Sounds like someone got a little lost. Ha! We thought the challenge was gonna be figuring out how to snag those kits without the adults finding out... Can it really be *this* easy? Guess it’s our lucky day! We can grab two bitches without breaking a sweat, then hightail it before anybody notices. If we play our cards right, we might not even have to fight anyone. Fortune like this don’t roll around too often! The Goddess must be smilin’ upon us!”

The other men grinned, seeing their leader in such high spirits. All of them were skilled fighters, but combat often came down to luck. Faced with a powerful beastman bearing down upon them in a reckless rage, there was no guarantee they would get away unscathed with the children still in tow. Being able to put this much time between the kidnapping and when the rest of the beastfolk noticed their young were missing was a windfall.

Naturally, the fact that the leader had referred to the girls as “bitches” and “kits” was to emphasize the fact that their quarry were nothing more than wild animals—supposedly less than human. The logic went that it was not humanoids they faced today, but mere animals. Thus, there was nothing wrong with their actions. It was the same as hunting kobolds or goblins...or so the kidnappers would tell themselves.

Of course, based on the old treaties, it was strictly forbidden by law for humanoids to meddle with beastfolk. Thus, these excuses served only to assuage the kidnappers' feelings of guilt. Not that these were the sort of men who felt a shred of guilt about what they were doing to begin with—but abducting young children had to weigh on the spirit, at least subconsciously.

Goddess only knew if these dubious claims would make a jot of difference to the authorities, or to the Crimson Vow...

"Listen up! Right now, we're a group of sweet old hunters, who just happened to stumble across a couple lost kiddies. Ain't nothin' as easy as having your prey walk along on their own two feet. If they get suspicious and won't walk anymore, that's when we rope 'em up. Until then, just stick with the story!"

"Who are you callin' sweet?!" some of the men chuckled. However, they all seemed to accept the plan. After all, their own lives depended on the outcome of this sally, so they were quite serious about their villainy.

"All righty, there they are! Er, wait, kinda big ain't they? They must be twelve, maybe thirteen..."

"I mean, even the young ones can be pretty huge for the bigger species! They've gotta be young if they got lost and just sat around crying. Let's check!"

After a hushed discussion, the men walked straight up to the girls, so as not to rouse their suspicions.

"Oh, did you two get lost? Hey now, don't be frightened! We're hunters. We're high-rank hunters, so we specialize in going deep into the woods to look for rare prey. Did you forget the way back to your village?"

Though these men may have been villains, not all villains looked like outright thugs. The leader of this band had a fairly respectable-looking face, though three of the other men did in fact look quite sinister...

Cat ears? Kind of big to be catfolk...or maybe they're tiger or leopard breeds? One of the men pondered. If the two girls were catfolk, they'd be around twelve years old, but if they were tigers or leopards, they might be ten or younger. That would still be within the acceptable age range.

Then the men glanced at the two beastgirls' chests and came to a collective

conclusion:

“Those are little kids all right!!!”



Crack!

Somewhere, something snapped.

It was at that very moment that the men had signed something: their own death warrants.

“Y-y-y-you’re hunters, m-m-misters?”

“Are you g-g-gonna take us back to the village?”

To the men, Reina and Mile looked like nothing more than two little beastgirls, trembling in fear. But in truth, they were fighting to suppress their rage. They were clad in dresses they had borrowed from the village girls, and atop each of their heads was a pair of cat ears that Mile had lovingly crafted. Naturally, they had been modeled after her favorite inn mascot, Faleel... They were a flawless recreation.

“Yeah, of course! We’ll get you right back there. This way, come along!”

Naturally, the men were beckoning them in the opposite direction from the village, but Mile and Reina followed obediently.

After a short while, the girls stopped walking, one turning worriedly to the other. “Wait, this isn’t the way to the village!”

“You’re right! This path leads out of the forest! Look at that big line of trees...”

The men laughed riotously.

“Ha ha ha! Took you long enough!”

“Glad we could get you this far. Don’t you girls worry—you’ve got a nice life ahead of ya with some rich master. Way better than you’d have in that backwater village or living a thug life like ours with danger at every turn. Be happy! No, seriously! You should be happy!”

In some ways, the man *did* have a point... Still, that was no reason to forgive trafficking.

“...around...”

“Hm? What?” the leader asked, unable to quite make out what one of the girls had said.

Both of the girls' eyes opened wide, and one said in an eerie voice, "Are there any naughty kids around?"

"Better eat you up..."

"Wh-wh-wh-wha...?"

"What the hell are you guys?!"

The little beastgirls, who up until this moment had been trembling in fear, were now muttering something bizarre, their expressions unnerving. The men were instantly put on their guards.

"Thank you for confessing your crimes..."

"And for your disgusting insult to our bodies."

"The sentence?"

"Death!!!"

The girls began uttering disturbing phrases, their bodies twisted at the waist with their index fingers pointed in bizarre poses. Still, creepy as it may have been, a pair of ten-year-old beastlings (or so the men still assumed) were infants compared to tough guys like themselves. No matter how much quicker or stronger they were than human children, they were still children, after all. Or so the men thought as they prepared to capture and bind the two...

"Owwwwowowowow!"

One man extended his right hand to grab a girl by the arm, but she suddenly gripped his wrist and wrenched it.

"Get the hell off of me! Damn it, she must be a tiger or somethin'—somethin' way too strong! *Ow!* This hurts, damn it! St-stop! Let go of me!!"

The man who had tried to seize Mile continued to howl. And as for the one who tried to grab Reina by the collar...

Fwump!

"Gaaaaaah!!!"

His outstretched right hand had been pierced by what appeared to be a small awl.

Reina was a mage, but that did not mean that magic was her only weapon. In fact, given that all mages had to defend themselves with in close-quarters combat were their staves, and that they weren't typically skilled fighters, it was commonplace for them to have some kind of concealed weapon as well. Reina had scarcely ever had the opportunity to use this weapon, which she kept between her left wrist and elbow, simply because she'd never been in grave enough danger to warrant it—or had been in such danger, but up against opponents to whom it would make no difference, such as an elder dragon. But when the situation called for it, she could release the clasp with a twist and have the awl in her palm in an instant.

“Y-you little bitches...”

Finally, the men had realized that something was wrong here. These children, who should have been weeping in fear, had launched an impossible counterattack and were now giggling maniacally, emitting a stream of downright eerie laughter. Only a fool would not find this unsettling.

“By our oath, we'll drag you...”

“...to the banks of the river Styx...”

“...ship you off to Hades...”

“...and send you first class into the flames of hell!” the pair recited.

Reina let out a huff of satisfaction. Finally, she had gotten to check number eight off the list of phrases she'd always wanted to say—courtesy of Mile's stories.

Incidentally, phrase number one was *Please, don't fight over me!* She had previously been quite distressed when Mile got to that one first. However, it was just two sets of girls—the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio—to whom Mile had quoted these words, so she was able to get away with it. If she had said the phrase to two boys, one can only imagine what might have happened...

“You fools!! Everyone, get in there and hold them down!” the leader cried.

“On it!!!”

All of the men, save for the leader and the two who had grabbed for Reina

and Mile, descended on the girls. Then, Mile shoved the man whose arm she had twisted into the rest of the group and...

“Hot Tornado!”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

After all, it was Mile who had passed the hot magic knowledge on to Pauline in the first place. Reina had followed along, of course, thrilled by the idea of a spell that would use little of her magic but could render a crowd of enemies powerless in an instant—without killing them.

And so, the kidnappers—or rather, slavers—now faced a double hot tornado from an enraged Mile and Reina. Unsurprisingly, they surrendered posthaste.

“So, here are the culprits.”

The Crimson Vow dragged the eight slavers back to the village, handing them over to the villagers. There was no need to secure any evidence of wrongdoing, as the men had admitted their own guilt before they were captured. Even if they hadn’t confessed, the circumstantial evidence would have been more than sufficient to prove they were criminals.

As it stood, the official job for which the Crimson Vow had been contracted through the Guild was merely to apprehend the targets and turn them in to the clients. They bore no responsibility for what transpired between the villagers and the men after that. The villagers were free to investigate and punish the men as they saw fit, without going through any human legal channels, whether those be the lords, their subordinates, or the royal courts. Beastfolk were not humanoids, so they were not bound by human law.

In this way, being killed by the beastfolk would be no different from being captured and killed by a goblin or orc. Unlike a goblin or orc, however, the beastfolk would not be run down by hunters or soldiers—all thanks to the ancient treaties established at the end of the Demi-human Wars.

In other words, they could do whatever they pleased, across the full spectrum from questioning to torture and even execution...

There was no need for a trial, and the captured men knew as much.

“Excellent work. Now, perhaps you’ll tell us about all of the individuals you’ve kidnapped before, whom you sold them to, and who your head honcho is. Hey, fellas, is the oil boiling yet? Are the irons nice and red-hot?” called the village chief, looking over to the kitchen with a grin.

Hearing a “yessir!” in reply, the criminals’ faces went pale, and they twitched in terror.

“Gy...”

“Gy?”

“Gyaaaaaaaaah!!!”

The Crimson Vow shared in the villagers’ meal of yurin-gi and orc-meat grilled skewers, right in front of the men.

There had, of course, been no actual torture. The chief had merely been calling into the kitchen to see how the meal preparations were coming along. It was a complete mystery why the men had spilled all their secrets...

“It truly *is* mysterious!” Mile quipped as the other members of the Crimson Vow shared wicked grins...

“Well, I guess that means our assignment is done?” Mile said, gauging the others’ expressions.

“Seriously? Of course not!”

“Yeah, leaving the job half-done like this would be such a drag.”

“The more criminals we catch, the more profits we get from their sale to the authorities!”

Naturally, the other three shared Mile’s reluctance to simply pack up and call it a day. At this point, there was no telling whether the beastfolk would turn the men whom the Crimson Vow had captured over to the human authorities. Should they decide to “deal with” matters themselves, there would be no revenue associated with the sale of the men as indentured laborers, and the

Crimson Vow would not get a cut. Pauline seemed rather incensed about this point.

“I talked with the chief. Here’s a list of all the children who have disappeared lately. In one of these cases, two villagers saw the children being snatched and tried to fight back, but there were too many on the kidnappers’ side, so they got away. This makes it clear that that particular incident—along with two others whose victims are listed here—were in fact kidnappings,” Pauline deftly explained.

“Without those witnesses, the village might have assumed that the children had gotten lost, had an accident, or been gobbled up by monsters. Then they might not have mounted a response soon enough, which could have led to more victims,” commented Mavis.

Under the unfortunate circumstances Mavis described, the list of victims would only continue to grow. Apparently, these men were the sort who were more than happy to resort to force if they couldn’t make a stealthy escape, which would have led to casualties among the adults as well—in the form of serious injuries, or even death...

“Of course, though the adult witnesses were wounded by those men, there were no fatalities—even though the criminals could have easily killed them if they wanted to. They must have thought it would be bad for the children to see the adults being killed, or just figured that as long as they could get away with the children, they didn’t need to go to such extremes. Though killing the witnesses would have been the best way to hide the evidence, so maybe the fact that they spared their lives means they aren’t really such bad people?”

“Of *course* they are,” Reina cut in. “But if they killed the adults and the children went missing, it would be a much more obvious case of a murder-kidnapping. That would mean the nobility getting involved, which would turn into a huge incident! If their only crime is kidnapping, as opposed to kidnapping plus murder, their lives are that much easier—fewer hunters and officials on the investigation and a lighter sentence should they ultimately get caught.”

“Ah...” Pauline sighed, cheeks reddening at her own naivete.

For the criminals, this distinction could literally be the difference between life

or death, both in terms of whether they received a limited or a full life sentence in their criminal indenture and also whether they were assigned somewhere relatively safe or sent to the mines. Even the most hardened slaver would have the sense to try and avoid the worst possible fate, if it came down to it.

“Besides, it just feels wrong to suggest that *serial kidnappers of little girls* might not be ‘such bad people,’” Mavis quipped.

“Okay, okay! C’mon, I get it! Leave me alone!” Pauline sniffed, reeling from Mavis’s pincer attack.

In a world without photographs, it doesn’t really matter if someone has seen your face, Mile reasoned. You might never see those witnesses again, and chances are slim to none that any of them would have a photographic memory. A simple hairstyle or outfit change could alter your appearance immensely. Even on the off chance someone could sketch your likeness, there’s no way of photocopying it and no TVs to broadcast it on. It’s easy enough to disappear that there’s just no point in killing someone and risking really riling people up...

Though totally face blind in her previous life, Mile had learned—at least a little—to recognize people in this one. She was still bad at it compared to other people, and so she couldn’t truly comprehend the concept of criminals needing to hide their faces. She supposed they could simply ask the men they had apprehended about this, but at this point, they couldn’t exactly be trusted to tell the truth. They’d say pretty much anything they thought might lighten their sentence. There was no point in forcing anything out of them. There was no way to verify their claims, and it wasn’t as though the men telling a laudable tale was going to have any positive effect on their sentencing.

“Well, anyway, what we need to do here is to head across the border and find this contact they told us about.”

Obviously, henchmen of this level would never get to meet with the head honchos directly. They were the sort of men who had the more dangerous jobs—the ones who got their hands dirty, so to speak.

“We’ve already completed the job that we accepted from the Guild, though. If we start messing in another country’s affairs and get caught...” Pauline trailed off.

“We can’t say that it was an independent request from this village, either,” said Mavis, picking up the thread of Pauline’s thought. “If you don’t take a job through the Guild, then you can’t request the Guild’s assistance if anything goes south. It would look bad not only for us but also for the beastfolk. Things could really blow up.”

“So what are we supposed to *do*?!” Reina snapped.

Mile, who had kept silent up until now, cut in. “We can’t let things go on like this. At this rate, eventually whatever shady organization is behind this is going to decide that it’s getting too difficult to keep abducting children and instead just bring in a bunch of people to round up the entire village and make one last good haul. Then, the adults might all be killed or sold off to some faraway land... And after that, they might just find themselves another beastfolk village. Besides, do you really think the adults in the village are just going to sit back and cry themselves to sleep, now that they know where their missing children have been sold off? If worse comes to worst...”

Mile did not have to complete the sentence; the others knew exactly where she was going with this.

“So then, what *are* we supposed to do?” asked Mavis, echoing Reina’s words.

“There’s no good solution. There are serious drawbacks to every option,” said Pauline.

“Don’t worry!” Mile suddenly crowed, seeming quite confident. “The Crimson Vow isn’t going to take care of this one—we’ll leave it to another party. A mysterious party of unknown origins!”

“*What?*” The others all looked flummoxed.

“No one knows who this party truly is or who hired them. So naturally, it’s impossible for them to face any kind of consequences. But whether it’s in the thick of battle or the depths of hell, when injustice is done or little girls are in danger, they’ll show up on the double. They’re a party of daredevil mercenaries!”

As Mile spoke, grins slowly spread across the faces of the other three.

“Oh right, *those* guys,” said Mavis.

“No need to worry if *they’re* on the case,” Pauline agreed.

“You’re right—they’re the perfect choice,” Reina seconded.

And then, the four girls cried as one, “*The Order of the Crimson Blood, now making their grand return!!!!*”

From somewhere in the distance came the sounds of fiends and devils, clawing their way up from the pits of hell...

“Well, we’re here now. Time to find this contact...” said Mile as the party arrived at their destination.

“I’m pretty impressed those guys investigated their identity this thoroughly. Guess they were worried that they’d just be cast aside and forced to take the blame if things went wrong,” Reina noted.

“Honestly, yes, they’re quite shrewd. They sent a scout out to tail this person after they met up with them and found out their real name and base of operations.”

“Well,” Pauline objected, “if the kidnappers were truly *shrewd*, they would neither have been caught as easily as they did, nor chosen such a risky career in the first place! No upstanding individual would ever take a job where one mistake could cost you everything, no matter *how* good the pay!”

“I suppose that’s true,” Mavis muttered.

“A-anyway,” Reina stammered, “let’s go and wring this so-called contact dry!”

“Yeah!”

“Excuuuuse me! We heard that this is where you can sell illegal slaves!” shouted one of four girls standing in front of a shop.

“Huh?! What the hell are you shouting about?!” With a scream, a clerk flew out of the front door.

The girls, however, simply looked bemused and loudly asked in reply, “I mean, this is the Eirral Company headquarters, isn’t it? We were introduced by Mr.

Vedel, whom the head clerk hired on the president's orders. He said that you were attacking beastfolk villages and abducting little girls to sell off as slaves..."

"Wh-wh-wh-whaaa?!"

At this point, the clerk should have really cut them off, but in his panic, he just continued to shout back at them—smack dab in the middle of a street filled with early evening crowds.

Some of the passersby halted and began muttering, as more and more people started to gather. Meddling with a beastfolk village. Raids. Kidnapping. And illegal slavery. All absolutely inhuman, heinous crimes.

"W-w-w-wai—!!"

Whether he was in cahoots with his higher-ups or merely an underling who knew nothing about the kinds of business they conducted, the clerk only stood there sputtering.

And meanwhile, the four girls grinned...

Chapter 108: Annihilation

“**I**NSIDE! Go!!”

It wouldn't look good for the shop if these girls just stood there belting out heinous accusations—whether they were slanderous or true. When it came to gossip, the truth was irrelevant. Anything that made a good enough story would spread like wildfire—while gaining plenty of colorful embellishments along the way. It was equally certain that any attempt to publicly correct or erase these accusations would not gain nearly so much traction.

Therefore, it was critical to stop these girls from speaking another word.

“Fine,” said Reina, “but if we never emerge from this shop again, or our corpses turn up on the riverbank tomorrow morning, I'm sure everyone here will be able to testify to the culprit and send for the guards— isn't that right, everyone?”

The onlookers nodded. The clerk also nodded, sweat pouring from his brow.

If anyone's going to turn up on the riverbank, it'll be him, not us! the members of the Crimson Vow thought, demure expressions disguising barely suppressed sneers. *That's if there's anything left after we burn them to ash...*

The girls were guided to a room inside the shop normally reserved for VIP customers. After a short wait, a rather portly fellow entered, accompanied by five other men. Apparently, there was not going to be any tea served.

“What is this about?” the rotund man asked, without any fanfare or introduction, slumping into a seat. Naturally, he would be the highest-ranking individual in the place, though it was unclear if he was the company's president.

One of the other men seemed to be serving as his aide, with the other four acting as bodyguards. Apparently, they felt it was sufficient to have one bodyguard to deal with each of these four little girls. This would have been a

safe judgment...were it not the Crimson Vow—or rather, the Order of the Crimson Blood—that they were dealing with.

It would be one thing if this meeting were happening at night. But for an upstanding merchant to be flanked by bodyguards throughout the entire day? That was a bit suspicious, especially because this was a particularly rough and seedy-looking bunch. You would think he would choose a slightly more respectable lot to bring before polite company. All things said and done, the four girls had to assume that these particular men had been selected specifically for the purposes of intimidation.

The four remained silent, offering no response to the man's question.

"Say something!" the man shouted.

"Well," Reina softly replied, "until we know who you are, I'm not sure how much we should be telling you. We can't be sharing vital information with ignorant thugs."

"Uh..."

Unable to refute this, the portly gentleman was momentarily lost for words. Seemingly to realize that Reina had a point, he decided to offer an introduction. Given that the girls had already come directly to this location, there was no point in concealing his name or title.

"I'm Oldyne, head clerk of the Eirral Company. Now then, tell me what this is about."

Obviously, the top dog himself was not going to show his face simply for the benefit of some nobodies from nowhere. Still, if they had gotten as far as the head clerk at this initial meeting, the company clearly had no intent of dismissing the girls entirely.

Despite the man's lofty title, Reina was not about to bend to his will.

"Listen, *we're* the ones who came here to ask the questions. We've found you out—we know what you've been up to. And we have a few questions for you."

Pauline backed her up. "We don't want anything from you, just so you know. We're only here to track down and retrieve the little girls who were abducted

as slaves. That's our job, and all you need to do is tell us whom you sold those little beastgirls to. If you can do that, we'll leave you alone."

The clerk sunk deep into thought. This was something he could work with. If they'd asked for damages or hush money, demanded the return of the girls, or said they were calling in the lords or the crown—then he'd have a problem on his hands. However, simply asking after the whereabouts of the children, with no follow-up action expected on the merchants' part...

"Please wait a moment."

The clerk stood and left the room, probably to discuss the matter with the company president. This was far too important a decision for a head clerk to be making independently.

Not long after, the clerk returned.

"Thank you for waiting. I have received my employer's permission to provide you with the details you requested. You see, we provided aid to a group of beastfolk children who left their homes in search of apprenticeships, owing to the poverty and famine running rampant in their village. Using an intermediary, who carried the appropriate letters, we gave these children recommendations as to where they might find employment. We can't attest to what might have happened after that, but our own commercial activities were clean. Call it a form of charity—and know that we have no further connection to the matter.

"That said, on the off chance we were *deceived*, and our cooperation as an innocent third-party had some problematic side effects—we have decided to provide you a portion of our client's details, which we would normally *never* divulge. To protect our reputation as merchants, you must not reveal—even to those named here—that we were the ones who provided you this information. As a further precaution, we will provide this information only verbally, not on paper—and only in hints, not in explicit terms. Is this amenable?"

The sudden shift in formality in the man's speech likely indicated that the girls had been upgraded in status from "rookie female hunters here to pick a fight" to individuals whose favor the company sought to curry.

Pauline nodded, and then the clerk began to speak.

It was a successful negotiation.

After the exchange of information was complete, the Crimson Vow left the Eirral Company shop and made the rounds of the Hunters' Guild, the guard barracks, and the Merchants' Guild. As they went, they loudly proclaimed—

“We are the Crimson Blood, passing through town on a job! We have come to hunt down the parties who abducted a number of young beastgirls from the neighboring kingdom with the intent of illicit enslavement! We have confirmed their locations from the Eirral Company and are now heading there! Incidentally, it was the third clerk of the Eirral Company who was in charge of this. The culprit himself was a Mr. Vedel, who was previously expelled from the Hunters' Guild. This man has already been apprehended. Now then, we shall be taking our leave!”

None of this was false. They had not asked anything of the Eirral Company, and they had done nothing to them. They were merely stopping in at all the relevant places to make their introductions before heading out, like traveling hunters typically did. As promised, they had not revealed from whom they had received their intel. And the way they intoned their fake party name was purposely close to the real one—close enough that they could simply claim they had been misheard if accused of giving a false name.

After making this loud announcement in front of a good number of guild staff and civilians, the Order of the Crimson Blood hastily made their exit.

No matter where they went, this bombardment of such inflammatory words as “beastfolk village,” “raids,” “young girls,” “slavery,” and “kidnapping” caused quite a stir behind them, but the girls ignored this and continued on their way.

Of course, they *knew* this would cause a stir. These were the sorts of dangerous words that could get the Merchants' Guild in trouble or even put the local lord's head on the chopping block—the latter being not a metaphorical threat but a literal one.

“Well, we’ll be passing through this town again on our way home. So if for some reason those merchants haven’t been punished by that time...” Reina bared her fangs with a wicked grin.

“There’s no way they wouldn’t be!” the others chimed, sneering.

They weren’t wrong. The associates of the Merchants’ Guild, the upper brass among the guards, and the nobility would never wish to risk their own status and lives. Obviously, the Crimson Vow were not about to let anyone involved in this incident get away scot-free. They would not rest until they had not only rescued all of the beastfolk children but also ripped out every corrupt element at the roots. They would make it so that no one would even dare to attempt such a crime ever again. They would drill it into the criminals’ minds that the risks and drawbacks associated with the abduction of young girls—particularly young beastgirls—were far too great to tolerate.

“Next up is the fief of Count...something or other.”

“Yeah, obviously no one would be brave—or stupid—enough to bring any beastgirl slaves into the royal capital. They would have to leave them back at their mansions on their own home estates,” said Mavis.

“In the capital, it would be impossible to cover up any unexpected incidents. If word got out, it’d reach the ears of every lord, merchant, and royal official within a ten-mile radius in an instant. Easier to control the situation on your own home turf...” Pauline agreed.

The pair were correct. Bringing an illegal slave into the capital would be as smart as wrapping yourself in dynamite and lighting the fuse. As a result, the Crimson Vow were headed to the lands and estates owned by those lords and larger merchants who had purchased the beastgirls as slaves.

Naturally, the Crimson Vow were not doing this with the intention of negotiating or buying the beastgirls back. With the exception of a few kingdoms, nowhere on the continent was chattel slavery—in other words, slavery based solely on one’s race or ethnicity, or one’s parents’ status as slaves—legal. The only legal kind of slavery that persisted in these regions was that which was at least theoretically self-inflicted—limited-term indenture as means

of punishment or repayment of debts. Furthermore, according to the treaties of old, not only were humans forbidden from meddling with demi-humans, but they were also explicitly prohibited from taking advantage of them in this way.

Though, of course, if the beastfolk were to perpetrate any criminal act, they *would* be apprehended and punished...

In any event, to kidnap young girls who were living peacefully in their own village and sell them into slavery was unthinkable—absolutely unthinkable.

And so, the members of the Crimson Vow felt absolutely justified in their decision to destroy every single trace of the offenders, without reservation, hesitation, or even the vaguest semblance of goodwill. Moreover, it didn't matter if they lied to those offenders in the process. Keeping promises and shows of sincerity were only for those who deserved them. There was no need to keep a vow extracted under duress or coercion. Likewise, there was no point in continuing to dutifully play by the rules that the other side had already broken.

“Well then, let's go! Crimson V—er, Blood, roll out!”

“All right!!!”

And so, the fiends from hell were once more on the march.

Fiends or...devils? No, even devils were a far kinder and more considerate sort.

“Seriously though, those hints about the buyers' names were way too obvious...”

“I mean, they really did just as good as tell us everything. Calling it a ‘hint’ was only a precaution so that they can insist that they didn't actually give up the names themselves. They just want to make sure they'll be left out of any fallout.”

“As if that'll happen...”

“Aha ha ha!”

Mile and Pauline laughed as the four walked down the road. Mavis listened in

with a conflicted expression.

“Well, I mean, our goal here is to bring back the children. I didn’t imagine that any intermediaries would be any of our concern. They aren’t the beastfolk who hired us or the perpetrators, after all. Of course, I suppose you couldn’t blame us if we chose to interpret our mandate a little more broadly...”

In point of fact, they were merely a party of hunters who had taken a job, so all they ought to be doing was the job they had been hired to do. If that job was specifically to rescue the children, then that was all they would do. If they had to fight some hired goons in the process, they would do so. But there was no sense in purposely stirring up trouble for merchants from another kingdom—particularly ones who’d positioned themselves as a cooperative, innocent third party and offered up the necessary information alongside semi-plausible excuses. That said, the perpetrators had already been caught and had sold out their employers, so the merchants’ claims of innocence weren’t worth much...

Still, this was ostensibly a job for a rogue, unlicensed party, independently hired by Mile. Because they were an unlicensed party, this was a contract executed directly between client and hunters, with no Guild involvement. Thus, the Order of the Crimson Blood were bound only by the specifications of the job as given by their client and by the laws of the land. Given that their client was Mile, and that the aim of their job was to apprehend a group of felons, everything they had planned fell well within the acceptable parameters.

“Oh, Mr. Noble, I’m so scared! There’s a big crowd coming here to kill you!”

“Here she goes talking nonsense again...”

“It’s Hiroko-chan! Her debut work! I can prove it!!”

“I have no *idea* what you’re talking about!”

In her usual fashion, Mile was spouting nonsense that no one else understood—though in this case, she really should have known better. Her joke had so many layers that barely anyone in modern-day Japan would have been able to get it...

“Whatever! Let’s just get going! I mean, I doubt it’d make much of a

difference in this town if it got out that we were tracing the route of illegal slavers. Plus, I'm sure that those merchants would rather not have it known that they sold out the buyers to save their own hides, so they aren't going to go proactively contacting them and letting them know that we're coming...not that they'll have much time to do that anyway. They're probably already inundated with their own problems after the little show we put on. Getting in touch with the buyers at a time like this would be as good as suicide, and rumors can't spread so fast that word of our investigations would have beat us here. At least, not given how quickly the four of us can move from point A to B at full speed.

"Rumors don't spread in a straight line," Reina continued. "Not unless someone goes out of their way to share intel with another party specifically. We can move much more quickly than any merchant caravan, which is the main mechanism for information getting spread from town to town. All of which is to say, we should try and move quickly, but I don't think we have much to worry about."

The other three nodded.

Based on what they had learned at the shop, they had been able to confirm three separate transactions involving the beastgirls. That matched up with what they had learned at the village as well, which meant the man at the shop had probably been telling the truth. After all, he had every reason not to deceive them after what they had shouted in front of all those people, about how they should look out for the Crimson Vow's disappearance and that, should this party go missing, not only would a new party be hired, but also that new party would be able to swiftly find out when and where their predecessors had last been seen. Were that to happen, the merchants would most certainly be outed as suspects in the mass murder of a group of beautiful young girls and face swift retaliation from the Hunters' Guild before the investigation into the kidnappings was even properly underway. Clearly, deception was a no-go for the company. Plus, if they were to offer up false intel, the girls would very quickly figure this out and protest accordingly, not to mention making sure their names came up in conversation with the guards, which would result in a hard interrogation. No, lying to the Crimson Vow simply would not do.

Typically, Pauline and Reina would have employed their patented method of

asking the same questions over and over, trying to exert psychological pressure to wring out any inconsistencies in the answers they received. But knowing that the merchants would have had no other choice but to tell the truth, Pauline had not even bothered to press on the man's every word.

"Well, we kept our promise. We didn't lie. We're just going places to make our introductions. So, there's nothing for us to worry about—that is, outside of making sure that all of the evildoers have been dealt with by the time we get back. For now, our first stop is that backwater count's estate. Let's mosey!"

"All right!!!"

No matter how reckless or lawless a hunter might be, they still minded their manners when it came to dealing with nobility—assuming that they did not wish to risk their own lives unnecessarily or purposely make enemies of people of influence. The Crimson Vow were no different, and even Reina, normally on the foul-mouthed side, knew when it was time to be on her best behavior.

However, that was only the case when said noble was acting normally and sensibly. If Reina was angered, all bets were off. She could be face-to-face with a king himself and it would make no difference. It would be the Eternal Force Blizzard for him—certain death.

"So these are the lands of Count Greynark."

The Order of the Crimson Blood had arrived at their first destination.

"Let's find ourselves an inn."

Naturally, they weren't stupid enough to head straight to the lord's manor first thing without conducting any investigation.

"Huh? But the manor is right there..."

At least, *most* of them weren't that stupid.

"Are you kidding me?! We have to find out what this guy's reputation is like and collect some evidence! We have to figure out what to do if the lord himself isn't actually a bad person, and this was just the work of some idiot son or unscrupulous vassal. Imagine if we only found that out *after* the fact..."

“Ah.”

Mile tended to lose sight of the bigger picture when it came to little beast-eared girls, but even she had to recognize the logic in Reina’s argument. So, the Order of the Crimson Blood secured themselves a room at an inn and headed to the Hunters’ Guild to collect intel.

“What a shame the clerk isn’t a little beastgirl...” Mile sighed.

“Not every inn has one of those!” The more Mile grouched, the angrier Reina got. “We’ve only ever stayed at *one* inn like that!”

“I mean...”

Mile was quite persistent.

“There aren’t even that many little beastgirls to go around in the first place! They’re rare enough that they’re worth kidnapping, aren’t they?!” Reina added.

“Well, I guess th-that’s true...”

The four stopped in at the guild hall, checking the information and job boards out of habit but finding nothing of note. Since they were pretending to be on a pilgrimage or training mission, they didn’t stop to greet everyone in the building. Outside of such journeys, the only reason for a group of non-local hunters to be stopping in would be if a job brought them here or if they were relocating for some reason—all unrelated things they wouldn’t be asking questions about.

If they were clearly a fresh new party, there might be a meddler or two. Hecklers, other hunters extending party invitations, inviting them to dinner or looking for a little gossip. However, from the way they were checking the boards, their well-worn gear, and their brazen manner, it should have been clear that the Crimson Vow knew what they were doing—despite being a party formed entirely of young ladies, with some children in tow. There wasn’t a soul around who’d misread the cues. Therefore, the only hunters who would bother talking to these girls were...

“Hey there, little ladies! This your first time in town? There’s lots we can teach ya, if ya like! *Lots*. Ga ha ha ha!”

Brave men, idiots, or both.

“Sooooooo, anyway!”

“Hmm...”

Mavis performed her two-cut version of her copper cutter trick, Mile used her fingers to bend another copper piece into quarters, Reina let off some explosive fireballs...and Pauline just sat there, smiling until it was all over. Though she had not shown off any magic, her mood was dark enough that her smile alone could send the men running...

The five men, now having gotten the *full* picture, helpfully told the Crimson Blood all they wanted to know through strained smiles—all while treating them to juice and snacks at the hall’s refreshment corner. The other hunters present and the staff on the other side of the reception counter watched with equally strained expressions.

The girls completely ignored the awkwardness. They were more than accustomed to it by now.

What they were able to ascertain from the men unfortunate enough to be on the hook for their refreshments—or rather, fortunate enough to be blessed with the Crimson Vow’s company—was:

“The count is a wasteful womanizer...”

“He taxes the people as much as he can within the national limits—a full sixty percent...”

“He’s arrogant and considers himself above the people...”

“And he’s quick to enact violence against his constituents...”

“So, your standard noble.”

Indeed, the count was the perfect archetype of a nobleman.

“Well, now we know that the lord here is a completely run-of-the-mill noble—in other words, a villain!”

“Whoa there! All we know is that he’s an archetypal noble. He may be egotistical and greedy, but we don’t know that he’s evil or criminal, or even worthy of a formal denunciation. If we go barging into his mansion now, we’ll just be breaking and entering!”

“That’s true...”

Mavis and Reina put the brakes on Mile’s shortsighted thinking.

“He’s certainly not a good person, but he’s still within the bounds of what might be considered acceptable for your typical noble. We don’t have enough information to take him down without even a trial.”

“And we can’t do any investigations like the members of those spy clans or cat-eyed sisters from Mile’s stories.”

“That would take way too long. But what to do?”

Pauline, Reina, and Mavis sank deep into thought.

“Why don’t we just go to his estate and find out about this man for ourselves?” Mile proposed.

“Mile...”

“Mile...”

“Mile, that’s...”

“A *perfect* idea!!!”

Anyone who believed that the Crimson Vow would not be stupid enough to go barging into a lord’s home without doing any investigation was sorely mistaken.

“So, here we are at the manor!” Mile announced.

“Let’s knock!” Reina reached for the door knocker.

It was no palace, and there were rarely even guards stationed outside of a regional lord’s mansion. Of course, there were guards on the grounds, but there was no reason to keep some decorative doormen standing outside just for the sake of keeping up appearances—what a waste of budget. Instead, the guards

would be on standby inside the house, with the task of attending to visitors normally left to the other manor staff.

Typically, less official visitors, such as hired workers or people who had business with the staff, would use the back door, but naturally, the Crimson Bloods walked straight up to the front. Their business was with the count himself, not with any of his attendants, so it was only to be expected that they enter through the most official channel. There was nothing odd about this...as far as the four of them were concerned, anyway.

After a few noisy raps of the doorknocker, an elderly member of the staff appeared. He was likely a butler, the highest position one could hold next to the chief steward.

Other than those visitors who had appointments, there were a wide range of individuals who might appear at the front door unannounced: emissaries from the palace, messengers from other noble households, couriers sent by the masters of the Merchants' or Hunters' Guilds, and various suspicious sorts. As such, it required both insight and prudence to avoid offending important visitors, while completely shutting out the conspicuous ones without too much fuss. This was not the sort of duty that could be left to any random maid.

"Who might you all be? Do you have an appointment?"

Naturally, the man already knew that they did not. Any butler worth his salt would be able to determine that.

"We're hunters. We were hired for a job and came to inquire about a young beastgirl slave who was purchased by the..."

Ding-da-ding-da-ding...

Mavis's cheery greeting was interrupted by the sound of a bell—one the butler seemed to have been hiding behind his back. Apparently, this was a signal for the guards.

"I will go and check in with the master. Please wait here."

Clearly, the butler was merely saying the right words to buy time for the guards to round the mansion from the back door and get into position, likely to capture the girls before they could even enter the house.

They're preparing to fight! Mavis signaled silently behind her back. Of course, the others were already prepared for any surprise attack. They had knocked at the door merely so that they could say they had at least made an official inquiry and requested an audience. It was fine if they were turned away at the gate. This did not impede their plans.

Still, attacking and capturing them without warning simply because they had mentioned “a young beastgirl” was truly outrageous. Even for a noble, this was obviously criminal behavior. It was clear any ordinary visitors who faced the count's guards would meet a tragic fate—but it was quite different when the visitors in question were the mysterious party, the Order of the Crimson Blood...

Things are moving along swiftly, thought the girls. *Perfect!!!*

“Please, follow me,” said the butler.

“Huh?”

The four were puzzled when, after a short wait, they were ushered into the mansion. No guards appeared from within, and there was no sign of the surprise attack for which they had braced themselves.

“What's going on?”

“How should I know?”

There was little point in this whispered conversation.

“Someone is *definitely* going to jump us from the shadows, or they're gonna put poison in our tea, or something like that! Maybe not a lethal poison but a paralyzing one, so they can get us to talk!” Pauline argued.

“Of course...” the other three muttered.

In this situation, it was only natural that the nobles would want to know who had hired the girls and how much information had gotten out about them and their wrongdoings. As such, there was no point in causing a big scene at the entrance to the mansion and attracting the attention of the neighbors, damaging the expensive front door and the surrounding furnishings, and letting their guards be gravely wounded for no good reason. The usual procedure here

was probably to let the visitors in as requested and wait until they let their guards down. And so, the four hunters were on high alert, particularly when passing before doorways or rounding corners, not letting their attention waver for a second...all except for Mile.

Of course, Mile was on her guard, too. She would never hesitate to go all out if they were to end up in a situation where her friends were in danger. However, she had been running her search magic constantly since they first entered, so she knew that there were no attackers waiting for them, and as a result, she was not especially worried.

The butler stopped in front of a door and knocked gently.

“Your guests have arrived.”

“Enter!”

It was impressive that they would still be introduced as guests when they were nothing but a group of commoners who had turned up without an appointment, spouting ridiculous things about enslaved beastgirls. In terms of social standing alone, they were the lowest of the low: rookie hunters. It would have been another matter if they were the owners of a wealthy mercantile firm, but they were truly in no position to be treated as respectable visitors. Thus, they expected to be met with coarse treatment and a bit of snobbery. Given the status of the person they were dealing with, some self-importance might even be justified.

They likely would not have even been let inside the mansion if the count was not plotting something. Thus, it was more than obvious to the girls that a plot was afoot...

When the door opened, the four were greeted by the sight of a heavy-set middle-aged man with thinning hair, sitting in an expensive-looking chair on the opposite side of a large table. Standing to his sides were three men who appeared to be bodyguards. That was one less than the number of members of the Crimson Blood, but they seemed to have determined that this would still allow them to exert sufficient force against a group of four ladies, two of whom were less than twenty and the other two of whom did not even appear to be of age.

Plus, even if they were one man short, the count would surely have assumed he could handle a single little girl on his own. No matter how out of shape he looked, as the eldest son of a noble household, he would have received some measure of sword training in his youth, and though he appeared unarmed, he could easily have a weapon hidden under the table or elsewhere.

“Hm. Four beautiful ladies, as I was told. You may sit now.”

It was unclear if he had agreed to meet them because it was part of some greater strategy or simply because he had heard they were all young women. At least he did seem ready to talk.

The girls sat down silently. They all wore unnatural expressions, as though purposely trying to appear calm. They were perhaps rather pleased at being called “beautiful.” Given the count’s status, there was no need for him to ply them with empty flattery, and given his tone, he certainly wasn’t trying to curry their favor. They could only assume his compliment was genuine, and no matter how foul of a person he might have been, it never felt bad to receive some genuine praise. Even if those words came with filthy strings attached...

There were four chairs, one for each of them, on the far side of the table from where the count was sitting. Moving from a seated position to a fighting stance took humans a bit of time. Furthermore, with the table in the way, they would be unable to take any direct swings at the count, and if they tried to move around the obstacle to attack, the guards who flanked him on both sides could easily block them.

In other words, asking the girls to sit was primarily a security measure, not a sign of consideration for these commoners who had come to call.

They took their seats fully aware of this. Honestly, the obstacle posed by the table didn’t mean much to the Crimson Blood, who had silent casting and spirit power on their sides. Everyone but Mavis had defensive spells in her arsenal, and Mavis was more than capable of standing and drawing her blade in the time it took the bodyguards to round the table and do the same.

“Now,” said the count languidly, “what business could you fledgling hunters possibly have with a nobleman such as myself?” Though he would certainly have been informed of what had been said at the entrance to his mansion, he

did not so much as acknowledge it.

“Well, you see, good sir,” said Pauline, “there is the matter of the enslaved beastperson that we hear you have purchased...”

When it came to a battle of words, no one was better suited to the task than Pauline. No one else was quite as adept at using sweet words to prevent any premature belligerence from a noble. If it were left up to Mavis, she probably would have addressed the man as a fellow noble, but in this case, that would not do. It was up to Pauline to be properly obsequious.

“A beast slave, you say? I know nothing of this! It would be quite a scandal if such a person did exist. What could you *possibly* be thinking, barging into a nobleman’s home and leveling such dreadful accusations without a single shred of truth? Have you any idea what it is you are implying?”

Apparently, this man was prepared to feign ignorance to the last. Pauline flicked her eyes over to Mile, who subtly moved her head up and down—the sign for *continue*.

With her search magic, Mile could detect any signs of life in the area and determine the category of target she had found with some certainty, such as if they were a human or elf or demon...or a beastperson. In other words, her sign was an indication that she had located a beastperson somewhere in the mansion. Therefore...

“Yes, we do. And we have confirmation that there is a beastgirl on the premises,” Pauline persisted. Neither of the other three moved a muscle.

Now then, what would the count do?

This is where you raise your hand and call for the teacher, Mile thought.

“Ah, yes!” the count suddenly said, voice stilted. “Do bring Lilia to me.”

“Right away, sir.”

No matter how ill-tempered the man was, it was good to see he still showed some slight decorum towards his servants.

If you were rude to someone as high-ranking as a butler, I bet they’d spread all sorts of nasty rumors about you, or leak information to your enemies, or even

get you taken out in your sleep... Mile thought. In truth, a betrayal by staff members was much less common than she imagined. This was less due to loyalty than the fact that servants' whole families might be executed if they were caught in the act, leaving them unwilling to risk the danger.

The butler returned in less than a minute, with a boy of roughly six or seven in tow. The boy wore incredibly fine attire, which clearly distinguished him as a nobleman's heir, and held the hand of a girl who might have been four or five years old. The girl's dress was not quite as expensive-looking but still looked like something a fairly well-off commoner might wear—and atop her head were a pair of cat ears.

"Whaaa?" the members of the Order of the Crimson Blood exclaimed.

From the looks of her, the girl was in excellent health—her hair fluffy and cheeks plump, not a single scratch on her. She wore a bright and friendly smile on her face. There was no way the count's servants could have changed her clothing and fixed up her hair in such a short amount of time, which had to mean that this was her normal condition.

Pauline, unsure of what to make of this, spoke a bit hesitantly. "U-um, you are...Sherry, correct? Your parents and the other villagers are worried about you. We're here to take you back to the vil—"

"*Noooooo!* I don't *wanna* go back there! I'm gonna live heeeeeeeere!!!" the girl shrieked.



“What the heck?!?!” Pauline, Reina, Pauline, and Mavis all screamed back.

“Wh-wh-wh-what’s going on here?!” Reina asked the count, utterly bewildered.

“What do you mean? Can you not see for yourself? This girl was brought to me by a merchant, who said there had been an issue with the employer who was supposed to take on this young beastchild as apprentice. He said that she had been left without a place to go. It would be one thing if she were human, but it could be quite risky for any less-than-savory individuals to get their hands on a beastchild. There are a lot of human supremacists and people of peculiar predilections in this world.

“It wouldn’t do to have any trouble—regarding an issue of such dire import, no less—arise within my lands, and so, we took her in. Her parents were paid fifty years of wages in advance, on the understanding that they might keep the funds even if she were to die or have an accident, and they took the money with no regard to how their daughter might be treated. The whole thing was akin to trafficking, which is as good as slavery. We took her in as a servant-in-training after bargaining with the merchants, who wanted to charge a small fortune simply because she was a beastchild. For now, she is merely a playmate for my son.”

Presently, the girl was cowering behind the boy’s back as the boy glared at the group of hunters before them.

Mile scrutinized the girl with her extraordinary powers of sight and saw that she had not a bruise or scratch anywhere on her face or limbs. And judging by her behavior, she appeared to trust the count’s son fully.

“You’ll never take Lilia!” the boy spat valiantly. “I would give my life to protect her! Lilia makes me happy!”

“I don’t wanna go home! I hate that place! There’s never any food or anything to do in that house, and my parents love all my brothers better than me just because I’m a girl!!”

The count watched over both of them, nodding in agreement.

The members of the Order of the Crimson Blood, meanwhile, were stunned

silent at the spectacle.

“Wh-what is going on here...?”

“Beastfolk are even more brazen about their chauvinism than elves. They tend to have a lot of children, so they are relatively lax in their care of them. When there are a lot of boys, it’s difficult for the girls,” Mavis, the most well read of the four, explained. The other three were flabbergasted.

“So are we...the *villains* here?” Pauline softly asked.

To which Mile screamed, “We’re innocent! Objection! *Overruled!!!*”

Later, they examined Lilia’s back and limbs for signs of any scars. Lilia—or rather, Sherry, as she was known back in the village—seemed to be in perfect health. (Apparently, the merchants had given her a new name, which one might take as a clear sign that they had no intention of ever bringing her back.) After penning what began as a scathing message from Lilia to her family—one for which Mavis gently suggested some kinder wording—the Order of the Crimson Blood decided to take their leave. Before that, however...

“Please forgive us!!!”

All four sincerely apologized to the count.

“I’m glad he forgave us...”

“Yeah, that could have gone really badly if not.”

After a bit more discussion with the nobleman, Mile soon became aware that the count and his wife were of the same ilk as her: beastgirl lovers. Not in a sinister sense—they truly did adore them. If not, the count would never have purposely taken in a beastchild to care for at his own residence. He could just as easily have sent her off to an orphanage or to the home of some commoner.

Meanwhile, the count’s son gave the strong impression of someone with a childhood sweetheart he intended to someday wed, which the count seemed to fully approve of. Of course, a beastgirl could never be an heir’s *main* wife, but that would have been the same for any commoner, beastgirl or not. She could

be kept on as a mistress, and though her offspring would not be in line for the peerage, they could still be raised alongside the main wife's children and serve as the heir's bodyguards—bodyguards of heightened physical prowess and unwavering loyalty.

Plus, should they ever need to do business or negotiate with any beastfolk in the future, the family would have a built-in liaison. And letting a beastperson guard his heir would win the count points for open-mindedness from other races (save for the human supremacists).

Finally, not being in the line of succession would save any future beastfolk children from facing the main wife's suspicion or malice. If they played their cards right, they could even have a close relationship.

In other words, Lilia's future was looking quite bright. At the very least, it was looking far better than that of the other girls still living in that chauvinistic village, or that of the lowest-ranked hunters, which already was one of the basest professions around...

"I would never have guessed what turned the count's mood around would be getting excited about beastgirls with Mile, though..."

Pauline, Mavis, and Reina all seemed relieved, but Mile shrugged. "I mean, if we *had* gotten into a fight, it would have been them against the party called the Crimson Blood, right? If anything went wrong, we could have run away at top speed!"

The other three stared at her silently. Mile truly was far too naive.

"Well, it is true that there is no party named the Order of the Crimson Blood actually registered to the guild and no record of this job being either issued or accepted," said Mavis. "We claimed that we were on a job as though we had accepted it through the guild, but Mile actually hired us independently, no guild involved. We were careful to talk around it, so nothing we said was actually a lie. But still..."

"If anything did happen, the guild would not intervene or come to our aid..." Reina continued.

Of course, there was nothing wrong with taking on an independent request, and they were not in violation of any guild regulations. It was just that, should anything happen, the guild would wash their hands of it, for better or for worse.

In such endeavors you reaped what you sowed, both in terms of risk and reward.

“Well, we’ve now reached the fief where the second child was sold, but...”

“Mile,” said Reina, “Why is it every time we arrive in a new town you make some announcement, like you’re explaining the story to someone? Does it have something to do with that promise you mentioned before?”

“It’s fiiiiine! Nothing to worry about!” said Mile, evading the subject.

“I really hope that it’s an evil noble this time,” Pauline sighed.

“Well, I mean, that’s not the best situation for the beastchild or the noble’s subjects...” Mavis said with a grimace.

Pauline’s wish was not one that any noble would have approved of.

“Anyway, let’s go and get a feel for the situation, like last time. Even if that lord was a total sleazebag, he did turn out to have a bit of a feti—er, passion?—er, *generosity* for beastfolk children. Doing some preliminary investigation is key,” Reina noted.

The other three nodded in agreement. Indeed, the count they had just dealt with was by no measure a *good* person. He was merely keeping a little beastgirl as a glorified pet, a playmate for his son, with no concern about the possibility of her later being bound to the boy as a lover. It wasn’t hard to find people who were kind to their family and pets, even if they were otherwise trash. Even Braiking Boss, the wickedest of wicked, was still sweet on Swanee...

But surely, the same situation would not occur twice.

The Order of the Crimson Blood followed their usual pattern—checking in at an inn, before heading to the guild hall to gather intel.

“Another one following the tempura...” Pauline muttered.

“*Template*, Pauline, *template*! Tempura is a tasty food!” Reina corrected.

Both words were frequently used by Mile in her bedtime stories, so the other members of the party were aware of their meanings. Still, one could not blame them for mistaking the two. To them, they were both easily confused foreign terms—little more than auditory nonsense.

At any rate, their investigations had revealed that the viscount who was lord of these lands was your cookie-cutter small-time petty noble. Nothing more to be said at this point. However...

“Is it gonna be all right this time?” asked Mavis, turning to Mile. The question made sense, given this was so far following very much the same pattern as last time.

“How should I know?!” Mile shouted back with a pout.

Even Mile couldn’t answer this question based on the information at hand.

Chapter 109: Going Undercover

THE CRIMSON VOW'S FIRST ATTEMPT at a rescue had ended in a happily ever after (for everyone except the villagers and Lilia—or rather, Sherry's—family), but Mile longed for more. Tens, hundreds of times now, she had played out a scene in her head in which she gallantly rescued a tormented beastgirl from slavery, whereupon the girl would fling her arms around Mile, clinging to her bosom with joy. She had even thought of the exact wording of how she would write out such a scene in a novel.

This current endeavor was meant to be her vengeance against the universe for letting the Servants of the Goddess steal all the juiciest parts of the rescue when they had helped save Faleel, the little beastgirl who worked reception at the inn, from that evil religious cult.

And yet.

And yet...

Mile, like Pauline, now desperately hoped that the next noble they encountered would be a wicked one. Mavis wasn't exempt from this desire, either, aspiring to play the role of a knight in shining armor, saving a captive maiden from a villain.

The four of them were really all of the same mind, even Reina. If not, they might not have accepted Mile's proposal for this job without a second thought.

"All right," Mile announced. "Stealth time, snake formation!"

The other three nodded.

"We were let off the hook last time because the count was in a good mood, and Mile got along with him, but we can't expect our good luck to last forever," said Reina. "Today we're facing a treacherous viscount, so it'll be a huge mess if we slip up. Mile, we're counting on you to make the decisions here, so don't let us down!"

Mile was a bit too dangerous a wild card when given completely free reign, but when they needed to establish a set course of action, she was the ideal one for the job. She was an excellent hunter—skilled at getting things done, if nothing else. Besides, the other members of the Crimson Vow were quite familiar with her invisibility field by now, so they were not worried in the slightest. They knew that their tagging along would only slow her down, and they had no doubt in her powers of espionage. It was truly their trust in their friend that put the rest of the Crimson Vow so at ease.

“I’m going now,” said Mile. The other three nodded.

They had reserved a room at an inn early in the day, and it was now only just a little before the first evening bell. Simply sneaking around was one thing, but there was no point in trying to gather intel when everyone in town was fast asleep, so Mile chose the time just after dinner, when the manor servants would have finished most of their duties and been left a bit of free time, to make her move.

It was around this time when all but the guards and scullery maids would be at their leisure, enjoying a short respite before it was time to retire for the night.

From the store of maid outfits she had in her inventory, Mile had selected the one that most resembled those worn by the maids in this region and put it on. Why did she have so many maid outfits in there, you ask? Well, a lady does have to have her fancies...

She’d chosen this outfit instead of the leotard she usually brought out for stealth missions with the thought that a young girl wearing a maid outfit might escape immediate suspicion, even if her dress was slightly different from the house’s uniform or her face was not a familiar one. Anyone seeing an obvious intruder would probably scream on the spot, but the latter was more likely to prompt rumors and speculation—perhaps that she was a messenger from another household or someone who had just started work there and had not yet been provided the standard outfit. More importantly, it had occurred to her that if she had the opportunity to speak with any little beastgirls, wearing

something too strange might put them on edge...

Thus attired, Mile cloaked herself in her invisibility field and snuck onto the manor grounds, though perhaps “snuck” was the wrong word, considering the fact that she merely strolled on in—albeit invisible to everyone else.

Okay, now if I was a little beastgirl, where would I be? Mile wondered. Even if she was kidnapped into slavery, she'll probably be treated outwardly as a “live-in servant with prepaid wages”... If they actually treated her like a slave, they'd have to keep her locked away in some dungeon, or risk a scandal. Any member of the manor staff with half a heart would deliver her to the authorities if they came upon an illegal slave in the household, and a young beastgirl no less. Any less charitable staffers would immediately sell that information to some other noble house with a grudge against their employers... At any rate, they'd never let any of their employees get their hands on such potentially life-threatening dirt. I'm pretty sure they'd just tell the child that her parents had sold her to them and treat her like any other servant until she got a bit older...

There were, of course, those in any world who would *not* wait for a little girl to grow up, but Mile knew little of such matters.

Depending how young she is, they probably won't have her serving or washing dishes...

This was less a question of causing a scandal and more due to the reality that, physically speaking, her hands and body would be too small to carry plates full of food. Not only would she not be especially efficient at cleaning, but it would also be difficult for her to avoid getting in the way of the other servants or breaking dishes. It would be the adult staffers who would be berated for ruining good food, and the food served in a noble's manor did not come cheap. No one would want to be held responsible for wasting it.

So, around mealtime, you would probably find a young girl in...

There she is! A little foxgirl!

Mile spotted a fox-eared girl of four or five in a room clearly set aside for other young servants. Granted, the foxgirl was clearly the youngest one

present. The others were mostly around twelve or thirteen. Any younger than that and they wouldn't be especially useful in terms of labor, nor would it look very good for the household to have true children on staff.

So, the fact that they would pay all that money just to get their hands on a little beastgirl can only mean one thing... They're fellow appreciators!!! Still, it's one thing if she's being cherished the way Lilia is, and it's fine if they're treating her like a normal servant, but if they're abusing her in any way...

She would never forgive them. Mile's eyes told a violent tale.

Presently, the girl was alone in the room, all of her roommates perhaps still busy with serving the master's dinner. After dinner was through for the aristocrats and they moved to take their tea, the servants would begin their meal, at which point the girl would probably be called away as well.

If they don't call her, and this girl is left alone to eat hard, stale bread or sent to bed without dinner at all...

She would *never* forgive them. The people would know of their sins! Such was the phrase that popped into her head.

There was no time to approach her at the moment. It would be mealtime for the servants soon, and her roommates could return at any minute. Their meals were probably taken in shifts, not all at once, and there was no telling whether this girl's turn would come sooner or later. She might get pushed to the end of the line because she was no help or made to eat early and sent straight to bed because she was a child; or inversely, she might be shown the kindness of going last, so that she could eat from whatever was left over at her leisure.

For now, it was best that she merely continue gathering information. And so, Mile decided to simply keep watching.

I couldn't find out anything at all... Mile groaned internally, gripping her skull.

Her frustration was inevitable. There was no way that the servants would spontaneously start discussing "How is everyone treating the little beast girl?" or "What's that girl's employment status?" when the little girl had already been there for months. It was equally unlikely that any members of the nobleman's

family would bring up the topic out of the blue. And it certainly wouldn't be any use observing them with guests around, as they would inevitably gloat about the presence of this rare beastgirl and give some carefully crafted spiel about why she was present.

I guess I will just have to ask her...

No matter the circumstances, if this was another case where the girl herself said that life here was better than it was back in her village, then Mile would stay out of the whole thing—though whether the parents of this abducted girl would be equally amenable to doing so was another story. However, the parents were not the ones who had hired Mile. And if the girl were to be dragged back against her will, that would be tantamount to another kidnapping—a crime, a felony even. Given the status of the Order of the Crimson Blood—or lack thereof—the guild would not be there to back them up in any altercations.

Of course, it would have been another matter entirely if this were a legitimate job brokered through the guild and accepted by the Crimson Vow, a registered party. There were some steep drawbacks that came along with the benefits of working under a false identity...

The servants went to bed early. They would be up the next morning at the crack of dawn to start their work, and staying up late into the night would only be a waste of lamps and candles. There was little that could be done in the dark of night besides sleep.

Thus, once the second evening bell rolled around, everyone began putting out their lights and tucking themselves into bed, talking with their roommates as one by one they nodded off or heading to their own rooms with a brief “good night” to their companions. For the Crimson Vow, this was about the time of night when Mile would be telling her stories. They could stay up as late as they wanted, as it cost them nothing to keep the lights on a little longer.

Okay, everyone's asleep! Better use a little sleep spell just in case...

Mile unleashed some sleeping magic on one of the servant rooms. Rather than use an area spell, she stopped by each bed one by one, leaving a single inhabitant of the room unaffected. Then, she enveloped this individual and herself in a soundproof sphere.

“Shurana? Little Shurana, wake up please,” Mile whispered into her ear.

“Mm? Huh...?” the girl replied sleepily. It had not been long since she had fallen asleep, so she was still at her most fatigued. While she had replied, she was clearly not yet truly alert—her eyes barely opened, and her lids were so heavy that they looked as though she might close them again at any moment.

Mile decided to cut right to the chase. “Do you want to go back to your village?” she asked. Until this matter had been cleared up, their conversation was not going to go anywhere. If Shurana wished to remain here, the same way that Lilia (read: Sherry) had, then Mile would simply take her leave and return to the other three. This was what the Order of the Crimson Blood had decided ahead of time.

Hearing Mile’s question, Shurana’s eyes opened wide.

“Are you here to rescue me?! I’ve been waiting for someone to come! Oh, oops...!”

She quickly clapped her hands over her mouth, realizing how loudly she had shouted. It was a small, four-person room. Causing all that fuss would immediately alert the others...

“Oh, don’t worry. I used a sleeping spell on the rest of them, and there’s a soundproofing barrier—uh, I put some magic around us that keeps all the sound in.”

“Ohh, you’re a mage?! They actually hired a powerful mage to save *me*! Wow-wee!”

Shurana was trembling with excitement. This seemed like an overreaction, but in fact, her surprise was quite understandable. Naturally, some mages existed among beastfolk, but the numbers were relatively low compared to other races, and those who could use magic in battle were even rarer. In other words, there were incredibly few beastfolk who would take up work as a soldier

or mercenary or hunter based on their magical skills alone, and the cost required to hire such a person for such an individualized mission would likely be staggering...

And yet, someone had paid all that money to bring her, a *girl*, back to the village. It was no wonder she was so thoroughly impressed.

This misconception was, of course, squarely Mile's fault, thanks to what she was wearing upon her head: a set of homemade cat ears. Shurana could only assume that Mile was a beastfolk mage that the villagers had scraped together the funds to hire. No human, let alone members of other races, would take on the ridiculous task of rescuing a beastgirl from a noble's manor at the rate of pay that a poor village would be able to offer—not once one considered what dangers would arise during the rescue itself and all the potential complications that might come after. The only ones who would ever accept such a job would be the Goddess herself or her servants, or some idiotic beastfolk... In this case, even the term “idiotic” would be kinder than such a misguided individual deserved.

Excluding the highly improbable possibility of a deity or angel taking interest in the situation, that left only the rare beast mage who might accept this job at a low fee for the sake of rescuing one of her own. One could assume it was because Shurana believed Mile to be one of her own kind that she trusted her so unconditionally. She would probably have been a bit more suspicious, otherwise.

In any event, it was obvious from her reaction that Shurana had been dreaming of an escape and had no intentions of remaining in this place if she could avoid it. For her part, Mile was a tad relieved that this had not been yet another fool's errand. Though everyone was on board with the current operation, as someone who was technically employing the others she could not abide the waste of everyone's time.

Incidentally, the pay Mile had offered the others for this job was three days of magic and sword coaching. This, of course, was gentler to the others' senses of pride than forcing them to accept money from a friend.

Mile *was* a little stunned to see such a different reaction from Shurana

compared with Lilia, especially since they did not appear to be much different in age.

They look the same age, but maybe she's older than Lilia, so she has better judgment? Or is it just because one of them gets to be a rich boy's playmate, and the other is a lowly servant? Or is it because she's aware that in just a few years she'll be forced into a different kind of "work"?

Naturally, there was not a soul who would go to the expense of obtaining a young beastgirl specifically with the intent of using her as a *normal* servant. Being too rough with her as a child could easily result in her death or at least serious injury, which would be a waste of an investment. While she was young, she would probably be assigned only simple manual tasks. And when she *did* get older...

Plus, there were certain sadistic fiends who reveled in seeing the despair on a young girl's face when she had been, until not long ago, living a normal life with her family and friends before being snatched away and treated as a slave.

"Do you want to stay here? Or go back to your village?" Mile felt the answer was clear, but she asked just in case.

"I want to go back to the village!" Shurana immediately replied.

She seemed like a smart girl. She had to be aware that a penniless beastgirl like her would be easily spotted and captured again on the double, so instead of trying to flee, she had probably been biding her time, merely pretending to be pliable and obedient.

Hm... Now what do we do? Mile sunk deep into thought. *We could all confront the viscount tomorrow, but he would just claim that Shurana was a normal "employee" whose wages just so happened to be paid fifty years in advance, and there are no obvious signs of mistreatment on her. He probably already even has false documents...*

It was incredibly simple to forge a document in this world. Literacy levels were low amongst the populace, so it was common even for one's signature to be nothing but X's and O's.

Yet Mile could not bear the thought of leaving behind this child who now

stood before her, certain that this was her moment of rescue, eyes glittering with hope.

Hmmm...

Mile thought, and then...

“Would you come with me?”

“Yes!!!”

“What were you thinking?!”

“Mile, there’s a certain order to things...”

“Mile, this is a bit much, even for you!”

Mile and Shurana returned to the Order of the Crimson Blood’s inn under the cloak of her invisibility field, slipping quietly into the room. Naturally, the others were incensed.

“Can you imagine the commotion when her roommates wake up tomorrow morning and don’t see her there?! That was why we agreed we would either take her back right out in the open, or if we couldn’t, sneak in and get her right after everyone else had gone to bed, so that we could get some ground between them and us during the night! Why would you do something so reckless?!”

Reina’s rage was understandable. If they were going the surreptitious route, the plan had been for everyone else to make their preparations to leave and wait outside the entrance of the town, while Mile snuck in to take Shurana, to buy themselves a bit more time before anyone realized she was gone.

“Well, what’s done is done. We’re on a tight schedule now, let’s hurry up and skip town,” Mavis directed, taking charge. “Reina, Pauline, get dressed! Mile, write a note for the innkeepers. They should be fine if we just explain that, since we already paid our bill, we didn’t want to wake anyone when we suddenly had to leave during the night. C’mon everyone, hurry up!”



With that, she began changing clothes, after giving Shurana a quick pat on the head to soothe her obvious nerves at the sight of Reina's anger.

However, despite all her expedience...

"Mavis, are you done yet?"

"J-just a moment, okay?"

Thanks to all the armor she had to don, it always took Mavis the longest to get ready...

"So, what do we do now?"

"Our initial plan was to punish the viscount, wasn't it?"

"Weren't you saying you were going to make a big production out of it?"

The others heckled Mile as they walked beneath the stars.

"L-Listen, a lot was happening!" she protested.

"Well, I mean, it's good that you got her away safely, but how do you plan to punish the viscount?" asked Mavis, easing into the conversation to take some of the heat off of Mile and to put Shurana at ease. The viscount was a natural topic of conversation, now that they were some distance from the town—after all, they would need to decide on a plan sooner rather than later.

"About that..." The next words that came from Mile's mouth sounded as good as if they had been sent by a goddess. "I don't think we need to bother."

"Huh?"

Reina and Pauline were speechless, and although Mavis protested, she did not seem particularly surprised. Either she had expected Mile to say this or else she felt the same way.

"Well, I mean, our duty—or rather, the job that I hired you all for—was to rescue the little beastgirls. I don't really think there's any reason to have a showdown with a lord, or wreak havoc amongst his subjects, or just generally cause mayhem... We already caught the kidnappers, and the intermediary merchants are—well, they'll be dealt with in time. Just to be sure, we'll stop

back by that town on the way home. If they somehow weaseled their way out of punishment, we can land the killing blow ourselves. All of that means that, at the very least, the kidnapping pipeline has been cut off. We've destroyed everyone but the buyers themselves. As for *them*, well, I'm sure they knew exactly what was going on when they made their purchases, but thus far, they've just been treating these kids like live-in servants with 'prepaid' wages. They haven't been abused or outright treated like slaves or anything..."

"Making them an innocent third party, more or less?"

"If they insisted that was the case, we'd have no way to argue with them."

Just because someone *called* themselves an innocent third party didn't mean they were truly innocent all around. It only meant that they were unaware of any suspicious circumstances. In the same way that someone who unknowingly purchased stolen goods wasn't complicit in the crime itself, a normal, well-intentioned buyer who was ignorant of the criminal circumstances surrounding their purchase had to be considered innocent in that aspect, even if they were a villain or a sleazebag noble. Case in point: the count who had taken Lilia in.

As Mavis and Pauline had previously explained, there was nothing technically illegal about paying money to obtain a child as an indentured servant.

"But what if they didn't just *happen* to purchase these children through an intermediary but actually gave those intermediaries advance orders to get their hands on the beastfolk children?" Reina asked.

"Well, obviously they would be complicit if they explicitly said 'Go snatch me a child,' but it would be hard to prove that," Mile explained. "They could claim they asked to be introduced to any young beastgirls who 'just so happened' to be interested in a term of indenture, and that they said nothing about actual *kidnapping*. The perpetrators themselves were the only ones who got something out of this for free. The intermediaries and the nobles paid their fair price, regardless of what that actual amount was or how wildly off it may have been from market rates..."

"Both the merchants who allege that they were just forwarding a recommendation for a worker and the nobles who insist they simply took someone in with a few decades' wages paid in advance could pass themselves

off as guiltless third parties. I mean, with the kidnappers, we caught them red-handed *and* on our country's soil, so they really have no way to defend themselves. But we only know that the intermediaries were involved because of the testimony we got from the kidnappers, so while they'd be arrested if they crossed the border into our country, we don't really have the authority to threaten them here. Their actions have no bearing on the laws of this land, nor are there any extradition agreements in place. Of course, there's nothing wrong with *us* enacting punishment on those filthy merchants, given what we clearly know about them..."

Any actions the Order of the Crimson Blood took would be vigilante justice. They were enacting retribution on their own terms, without any legal basis—and in that regard, they would be not much better than a lynch mob. Even if such a thing were the will of the people, it was still clearly illegal.

"Seems like this is a complicated one..." Mavis muttered, ever the good, lawful knight.

Reina had no such qualms. "If we get caught, that is."

Still, this was Mile they were talking about. Her idea of a punishment was probably just making a big show of the merchants' wrongdoing and then making them take responsibility for their actions, which wasn't unreasonable.

"It's *fiiiine*! Don't sweat the details!" Mile chimed in.

"This is more than just a detail!" Mavis protested. "This is the main subject!"

Mile, however, did not seem to care. She usually tried to follow the rules of whatever place she visited. Whenever Reina got too hotheaded, or Pauline devised a scheme that was just a little *too* wicked, Mile was there to keep them in check. She followed her own ridiculous moral rules, which were incomprehensible to the others and held no water in this world, such as "satisfying the conditions of legitimate self-defense" or remaining faithful to the "Rules of Engagement." As long as it didn't cause any huge issues, the others just went along with her whims, whether they understood them or not.

Normally, the thought of vigilante justice would never even cross Mile's mind. *Normally*.

“They are just little girls, though...”

“Yes, and beast-eared girls at that...”

“It looks like our hands are tied here...”

This was inevitable. Reina, Pauline, and Mavis knew this with every fiber of their beings.

“But if Mile says that she’s willing to let the viscount go, that’s fine with me.”

“Yep, I have no objections.”

“Yes sirree Bob, sounds good to me!”

Mile’s heart warmed at her teammates’ consideration as all of them agreed to back up her selfish decision. Pauline even went so far as to jokingly use a phrasing she had picked up from Mile’s stories, just to emphasize how much this did not bother her.

“I guess we’re going to have to leave this mission open-ended...”

Shing!

Mile’s eyes suddenly glittered—a mark of her spotting a punchline. As soon as she noticed this, Mavis’s face crinkled in grim anticipation.

“Time to tie up those loose ends! I’ll do it myself!”

Shurana, meanwhile, only stared, not having the slightest clue what was going on...

“Okay, team. Next up, we’re off to the home of the merchant who purchased little Salisha!” crowed Reina.

“All right!!!” the other three cheered, right fists pumping into the air.

“So we booked this inn and did some investigation into the merchant house in question. The result of which is...”

“They’re as filthy as can be!!!”

Indeed, based on both the house’s reputation in town and the girls’ own investigation—which they’d conducted by posing as customers—the merchants

in question were nothing but the most stereotypically corrupt capitalists. In their day, the Crimson Vow had encountered plenty of upstanding merchants, as well as plenty of horribly corrupt ones. There was the merchant they had dealt with in the rock lizard incident, not long after their graduation from school. There was the merchant who had tried to leech off of them while they were hunting those lizards. There was the merchant who had tried to ruin the small-time Aritoss company. And there was the merchant who had betrayed Reina's friends, the Crimson Lightning, and the one who'd had Pauline's father killed and taken over his shop.

Okay, so perhaps most of them had been at least slightly questionable. And the merchants here were cloaked in the same utterly villainous aura.

"So, the problem here is..."

"Yeah?"

"There are no eyewitness reports of any young beastgirls!"

The reason for buying a beastperson young was to domesticate and train them in obedience from an early age so they would be more compliant. It would never do to overwork them from childhood and have them die an early death. The Crimson Vow reasonably assumed that these girls would be treated like typical low-ranking indentured servants, as had been the case with Shurana. And yet, there had not been a single sighting of any beastgirls around town.

A young girl would never be expected to do heavy manual labor in a warehouse or engage in other punishing behind-the-scenes work, which would be akin to throwing her onto a battlefield. Even washing was out of the question, as her hands would be too weak and small, and her arms too short to reach the clothesline. At best, she could be expected to do a bit of cleaning, or work as a chef's assistant, peeling potatoes and chopping onions and so forth.

All of which meant that the girl would be working alongside plenty of the other servants—which, in turn, meant the staff, as well as certain guests or customers, would be aware of her existence. And yet, the Crimson Vow had not heard a single mention of a local beastgirl, whether from the customers or from the young female employees who Mavis seduced—er, questioned.

"D-don't tell me that he's already finished having his way with her, and now

she's somewhere six feet under!" said Mavis, paling.

Pauline shook her head. "That's impossible—Mile's still calm. You know that girl never lets her guard down. I'm sure she's using her search magic to scan for any signs of life, and keeping an eye out for anyone who's hurt or sick and on the brink of death, so we can probably assume things aren't that dire. Still, chances are high that the situation here is pretty different from Lilia or Shurana's... Right, Mile?"

Mile fell silent and gave Pauline only a solemn nod. Seeing this, a look of worry spread across Shurana's face. Reina patted her on the head. Shurana looked up at Reina, her eyes teary.

Jealous, Mile piped up. "*Reina!* How could you steal my thunder like that?!"

"Way to ruin the mood, Mile," Mavis sighed, leaning into the drama.

"Anyway, we'll check back tonight," Reina continued. "Mile, no going rogue this time! Find out what's going on in there and report back to us, *then* we'll pick a course of action! Oh, but you can get in contact with Salisha and find out what she wants, so long as no one else finds out. We actually won't be able to make any further plans without knowing that anyway. Got it?"

Mile nodded.

Once night fell, Mile set out. The other three waited at the inn with Shurana.

It was difficult to predict when Mile might return, depending on whether her chance to speak with Salisha came after everyone else was asleep or sooner. Regardless, they would have to decide on a course of action by the end of the night. Depending on the results of Mile's mission, they would either get moving first thing in the morning or perhaps wait until the next evening. Either way would give them the necessary time to make any preparations needed.

Even if their discussions ran long and they had to move first thing in the morning, the Crimson Vow would be fine operating on minimal sleep. Staying up for a day or two was nothing to hunters. They frequently ended up in situations where they might have to press through a dangerous forest or enemy territory without rest, or run for extended periods of time while defending a

merchant caravan from assailants or monsters, regardless of whether it was noon or night. So far, the Crimson Vow had not had to deal with that sort of thing, but they had the proper training just in case.

The truth was that they usually only took comparatively easy jobs on that front—or, more to the point, work that was incredibly difficult for other parties happened to be easy for them. It wasn't that the party avoided difficult work. It was just that other parties did not have inventories or portable toilets and baths or barrier spells with alarm capabilities.

To put it more plainly, other parties simply didn't have the innovation known as "Mile." That was the only difference.

Invisibility field activate!

Mile began shifting into stealth mode as she approached the home of the merchant in question. She did not activate her anti-sound barrier at this time, as it would only render her unable to hear any noises or conversation outside of it, which would be quite inconvenient for her. Nor did she bother with any magic that would mask her body heat, as she was not going up against any snake monsters or snake-type beastfolk—not that the latter existed. Her scent was of little concern, either.

Indeed, as far as animals went, humans were relatively simple creatures...

As before, she had donned an appropriate disguise, cloaking herself in the sort of garb your average shop employee or courier might wear. Even if it did not match the attire of this shop's staffers exactly, it was still inconspicuous enough that someone would just assume she was a messenger from another shop and not immediately sound the alarms. That was on the off chance that she was even spotted in the first place. Only Mile would go to such lengths in these situations. Of course, she had no idea that the others wondered how it was that she could be so diligent in these matters and completely overlook far more fundamental things.

Okay, snake mode activate! Not that I have any cardboard boxes here...

Mile snuck into the merchant's home in the same way she had infiltrated the

viscount's keep, only to find...

Nothing?

When she first came to scout the shop, Mile had detected a beast-like presence in the vicinity, and while she had been relieved to sense no injury or weakness in this person, she had not pinpointed an exact location. She figured there was no use in worrying about that if they weren't going to be breaking in immediately.

Of course, she was quite capable of pinpointing the assumed beastperson's exact location if she wanted to. But it seemed a bit like cheating to do so immediately. If a young beast-eared girl was in danger, Mile would not hesitate to intervene at once, but in this case, the situation did not seem quite so dire. Pulling out all the rule-breaking magical stops whenever she felt like it would not be within the bounds of behavior for an "average, normal, everyday girl." At least, that was Mile's thinking.

Still, she could search for the girl or simply wait around at the servants' dining area at dinner time to spot her. Or else, she might linger until she saw someone carrying away a portion of leftovers more meager than the rest of the servants would receive and follow them.

In the meantime, Mile loitered around the mansion, making rounds between the storefront itself, the offices within, the storehouse, the employees' living quarters, and the quarters of the merchant's family. Finally...

They're utterly irredeemable!

Based on what she overheard from the clerks, the head clerk, and the president himself, this business was involved in fairly illicit—no, in fact, *criminal*—activities, and it was clear that they were habitual swindlers. Not only were they crooked in their business dealings, but they were also engaged in *violent* criminal activities, working with the likes of street thugs and ex-hunters who had been booted from the Guild.

Threats and extortion against suppliers. Arson and looting of the factories of rival companies. Of course, the merchants were merely pulling the strings. Publicly, these would be crimes that were perpetrated by "unknown thugs," who had nothing to do with them.

With plenty of time on her hands and the knowledge that crimes were being perpetrated, Mile decided to rifle through their documents. She soon found the company's safe, which was so poorly hidden it didn't even take magic to locate it. They had employed the most basic trick—a safe hidden behind a painting. Of course, while putting something behind a painting or wall scroll was pretty commonplace in modern-day Japan, it wouldn't be so surprising for someone in a world without TV or comics to actually think, “Bwa ha ha, they'll never think to look *here!*”

And, obviously, cracking the safe was—for Mile and the nanomachines—as easy as taking candy from a baby. This world's technology was not advanced enough to produce anything particularly secure, although in truth, even a modern-day Earth safe wouldn't have stood much of a chance against Mile and her “assistants.”

Mile: “Do it!”

Nanomachines: YES, MA'AM!

That was all it took.

Well, I guess my Corrupt Merchants collection is complete! This ticks off all the special achievements, too, so that means a one hundred percent completion...

As a precaution, Mile shut the safe as soon as she had taken the documents out, huddling with them in the corner of the room beneath her invisibility cloaking and sending out regular checks with her search magic so as to be aware of anyone approaching.

Huh? What's this? Slaves? And this many?! It's not just beastfolk—they have human slaves here! They aren't just buyers... This is like Grand Central Station! So that's why the slaves are hidden away from prying eyes. They're going to be sold off again soon...

It seemed they had made it just in time, before Salisha was sold off elsewhere. Of course, even if they *hadn't* made it in time, the members of the Crimson Vow would have put the screws to the shop owners and find out where she had been sold—thereby adding one more corrupt rich person to

their hit list.

Okay, now to just put these back in the safe...

It would cause quite a panic if the owners found their hidden documents had gone missing. Plus, if Mile were to turn these papers in to the authorities, that would mean answering a lot of questions about how she had come by them. Worse still, you never knew if some higher-up might be in on the whole thing and might just confiscate the documents and capture the Crimson Vow instead. For all these reasons, it was preferable that the captive Salisha be safely recovered and that these documents be left in the safe where Mile had found them.

Oh no! The staff have already started eating...

Mile suddenly realized that perusing the documents had taken a bit longer than she had anticipated.

Crap. I figured I'd follow whoever was taking food to Salisha. Given the circumstances, there's no way she'd be allowed to eat meals with the other servants.

Instead, she would just have to keep searching around the manor.

Oh, forget it, this is boring. Magic time!

Goodness, Mile, whatever happened to that desire to do a good old-fashioned search without relying on magic? If the other members of the Crimson Vow had been present, they all would have rolled their eyes.

Indeed, Mile was driven about the things she was driven about...and otherwise, she was incredibly lazy.

*Hm? Oh, she's close. She's right under my nose, but I don't see her anywhere...
Oh, wait! She's underground!*

Mile's face twisted in vexation.

I suppose common sense would dictate that if someone were trying to keep a

young beastgirl away from prying eyes in a manor of the rich and powerful, she would be kept in the basement...in a gorgeous room, a fluffy paradise where she could be loved and cherished! Ugh, this is my life's dream—er, no, wait a freakin' minute!

Mile was incensed. Even *she* was not that far detached from common sense.

There must be a trapdoor somewhere... Aha!

With her search magic, it was simple to locate a void beneath the floor. Obviously, the part closest to her would be the entrance. Once she had found the door, the primitive lock, which again had neither complex mechanisms nor electronic components, was no match for Mile's lockpicking prowess (read: raw physical strength). Of course, as with the safe, it would have been even simpler to merely ask the nanomachines for their help...

When she was sure the coast was clear, Mile quickly opened up the trapdoor and slipped inside. Even if she herself was invisible, it would still look strange if the trapdoor was to suddenly open and shut all on its own.

A little room at the bottom of the stairs with nothing in it... And one door that leads farther inside. Well, I guess this isn't some grand underground dungeon. If you dug out too big of a space without the appropriate physical calculations, it would just collapse under the weight of the structure above it.

If it had been up to Mile, she would have planned things out carefully, using reinforcement magic on the walls and ceiling, putting up support beams and the like. Even in this world, professional architects and carpenters would have taken such things into consideration during the design phase.

But that did not appear to be the case here. The room was warped and disproportionate, the walls pocked, and the ceiling curved. No matter how you sliced it, this had been a slapdash job, probably orchestrated by a bunch of amateurs. It certainly didn't look like the sort of basement that had been dug out before the rest of the building was built, but instead, one completely retrofitted—a room dug beneath an existing structure.

Pondering this, Mile proceeded down the stairs, toward the singular door in the room. Other than the rats and bugs on the other side of the door, her search magic only picked up a single sign of life. There was no need to keep

watch on a little girl who was locked away all alone, it seemed. She dropped her invisibility so as not to alarm the girl, and opened the door...

Before her was a little girl, around the same age as Shurana, with a pair of large rabbit ears atop her head. Though it was unlikely she would have been looking toward the door already, she seemed to have sensed movement—perhaps thanks to her rabbit heritage—and was staring right at Mile. Clearly, it was a reflex, as she quickly averted her eyes and looked silently to the floor, rather than react to this new arrival.

Mile gave an internal huff of annoyance. *You're supposed to say "Who's there?"* Mile thought. *If you don't, how can I respond "A robber"?!*

The girl did not appear to pick up on Mile's irritation. A moment later, Mile herself had moved on. *Never mind that! She's got bunny ears! Bunny ears! No, wait, never mind that, either! What the hell is wrong with me?!*

Putting aside her many conflicting desires—temporarily, though certainly not for good—Mile trembled with rage, her eyes opening wide. Between herself and the rabbit-eared girl was a wooden lattice. Beyond it was the girl, a threadbare cot, and a tiny table and chair she likely used for her meals. In other words, this was no better than a prison cell.

The cell looked big enough for several occupants, but the girl was the only one there. There were probably usually other slaves in here as well, and Mile had just so happened to come when this girl was the only one. It wasn't the only cell, either. There were several more, standing empty in a row. This was very clearly a way station for slave traders.

Slaves were likely sent here from recipient firms like the first merchants the Crimson Vow had questioned, who hired the actual perpetrators and then sent the slaves out to various destinations.

Softly, Mile muttered, "They won't get away with this."

Chapter 110: Crushed

“I’LL DESTROY THEM!”

The words rippled forth from Mile’s throat, but she swiftly shook the thought from her head.

“No, that can wait! That’s something that all of us should get to do together! For now, comforting this child is what’s most important!”

Indeed, Mile was honorable enough to prioritize the girl’s security over her own desires—lady or no, she was still chivalrous, gender norms be damned.

“You’re Salisha, right? From the beastfolk village? I’m about to ask you some very important questions. I’d like you to answer with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no,’ okay?”

This was neither one of the humans who usually came to harass Salisha, nor one of the humans who brought her food and water, nor even one of the guests the merchants brought around

to gawk at her. Realizing this, the previously dispassionate girl turned once more to look at Mile. The moment she got a proper look at her, the rabbit-eared girl’s eyes went wide.



“Okay, are you ready? First off, do you want to flee this place and return to your village? Or would you like to flee this place and go somewhere other than the village? Or would you rather remain here?”

The girl was quiet for some time, and then said clearly, “Yes! No! *No way!*”

Perfect.

Satisfied with Salisha’s responses, Mile folded her arms, nodding heartily. Despite Salisha’s initial listlessness, she now seemed full of vigor. It didn’t occur to Mile to find it strange how she unconditionally trusted this total stranger. She was possessed of a baseless confidence that young girls were always fond of her. It surely didn’t hurt that she was wearing one of the cat-eared headbands she had a habit of putting on...

“I’m a hunter. I was hired to come rescue you. Can you hold out just one more day for me? I’ll be back tomorrow with my friends to collect you. In order for this operation to go smoothly, I need you to tell me anything that would be relevant, like how they’ve been treating you here, how many people come down here and for what, what time they feed you, and anything else you might be aware of. That will help me plan when and how we can come back for you tomorrow.”

Salisha gave a hearty nod and told Mile all that she knew.

It was only early in the evening, so they had plenty of time, and the isolation of the room meant that no one would be suddenly bursting in on them. Mile just had to keep her short-range search magic scanning the basement and the room that led to it. With her wildly acute hearing, there was no way Mile would miss the sound of someone opening or closing the door.

Because there was only the one exit, there would be nowhere to run if she did pick up on someone approaching, but there were plenty of ways for her to avoid detection, such as sneaking past them under her invisibility field or simply hiding herself and crouching in the corner of the room.

So as not to startle Salisha, Mile had warned the little girl ahead of time that she would be using some invisibility magic to hide herself, should anyone appear.

At any rate, Mile now had all the information she needed and made her retreat back to where her friends awaited. Naturally, as she made her exit, she took note of the security stationed at the shop in the evenings as well.

“So, Pauline, do we have the clear to go all in on this one?”

“Yes. In this case, the merchant who purchased Salisha is clearly guilty of an indefensible criminal act. He’s a malicious, habitual felon. If we simply sneak Salisha out, he’ll just try to get his hands on another little girl...whether beastfolk or otherwise. He must have a lot of help and a lot of connections to run an operation of this size, so it would be simple for him to link up with a new intermediary—what you and I would call a slave broker—or even make direct contact with the slavers themselves. Even without the criminals we’ve already taken steps to eliminate, they’ll find someone else in no time.”

“Hmm. This sort of merchant *would* have those kinds of connections. Plus, given that it was a young beast girl they got their hands on and not a human girl, we can suppose that they’d probably go after another beastfolk village—and if they couldn’t get their hands on a beastgirl, they might go for an elf or a dwarf or a demon or some other nonhuman race. If that were exposed, it would be a huge debacle...”

The ancient treaties were a tale from antiquity, not taken very seriously by anyone besides the royal families and nobles who insisted on passing traditions down to their descendants. Naturally, the Austien family were in the latter group, so Mavis was well versed in these matters. Thanks to their previous excursions, the rest of the Crimson Vow were now aware of these as well. Therefore, neither Reina nor Mavis had any objection to the more extreme measures Pauline had proposed. And as for Mile...

“He won’t get away with this!”

And thus, their plan was underway.

“I’m back to make some preliminary arrangements, Salisha!”

Well before the second morning bell rang, Mile made her way back to the

basement where Salisha was imprisoned in her cell.

“First off, I’m going to put a little makeup on you. I’ll explain what’s going to happen next while I work.”

After using earth magic to block off the entrance to the basement so that no one would interrupt them, Mile deftly unlocked the cell door and stepped inside. In truth, blocking the entrance was hardly necessary; the earliest anyone came down to the basement each day was a little after the second morning bell, to offer Salisha a crude brunch. Still, Mile was never one to welcome unexpected guests. After all, she could not allow anyone to see Salisha’s new look until the time was right.

“The preparations are complete! I’ve done Salisha’s makeup and explained the plan to her,” Mile explained as she returned to the rest of the Crimson Vow, who had already packed up and paid for their room at the inn and were waiting in a nearby clearing.

“Then let’s not waste any time. Let Operation Extreme Measures commence. Full speed ahead!”

The name of the plan was a bit on the nose.

“Crimson V—er, Order of the Crimson Blood, roll out!”

“All right!!!”

Just as the second morning bell struck, the shop opened its doors. It was around this time that the town guard had finished changing shifts as well, from the night shift to morning, so the guards were bright-eyed and ready for action should anything occur. The streets were filled with people moving hither and thither on their way to jobs—though, of course, many workers would have been at work since much earlier.

Four adorable girls in hats walked along the main road, stopping just before a certain store.

“We’re here,” said one.

“Well then,” said another, “let’s do it. One, two...!”

“We’ve come to collect the abducted beastgirl you’ve been keeping as a slave!”

Most upstanding businesses might have at best two or three guards on staff to deal with persistent and belligerent customers or local thugs. Having this many rough-looking characters on-site suggested that they were anticipating trouble—no doubt because there was something underhanded going on.

“What’s all this nonsense about?!” one of the staffers shouted at the four girls.

“Well, as you’ve just heard, we’ve come here to request the return of the abducted beastgirl who’s been kept here as a slave—”

“I’m not sure I would call standing outside a business making accusations a ‘request’! Also, I have no idea what you’re talking about! Cease this baseless slander!”

Pauline sneered at the man’s protests. And then, even louder, she continued, “My! We tried to handle this with a peaceful discussion, but these men who have captured and enslaved a little beastgirl refuse to even negotiate with us! Now that it’s come to this, I suppose we have no choice but to battle these fearsome foes in order to rescue the girl! Come now, everyone, let’s have an upstanding fight and save that little one!”

“All right!!!”

Pauline had made certain to repeat the keywords “beastgirl,” “abducted,” and “slave” as many times as possible. Then, the four of them doffed their caps, revealing cat ears (Mile), dog ears (Mavis), fox ears (Reina), and tanuki ears (Pauline).

“B-beastfolk...”

The shop staff and the gathered crowd were stunned.

Naturally, the Crimson Blood were all wearing the animal ear headbands that Mile had crafted.

“B-beastfolk...?”

“A-and four of them, no less...”

“Th-this won’t go over easy.”

“That should have been obvious from what they were saying!”

“Someone go tell the guards!”

Various people in the crowd began to mutter, but the members of the Order of the Crimson Blood paid them no mind, proceeding according to their plans. They had already declared war on the shop, which meant that there was no derailing the battle that was already underway. After all, they had already made it abundantly clear that these men were fiendish criminals, that this was a battle for the sake of rescuing an imprisoned little girl, and that they had no choice but to fight, as these criminals had refused to negotiate with them. Therefore...

“Wind Cutter!”

“Wind Edge!”

“Clay Pillar!”

“Water Lance!”

Shoop, shunk, ba-doom!

The Order of the Crimson Blood let off their spells one after the other, sticking to wind magic, spirit power (read: magic), earth magic, and water magic. It was only responsible to avoid using any fire magic in the middle of town.

“Why are you attacking our whole store?! Why not just *us*?!” the shop staff wailed. Of course, it was not as though they actually wished to have attack spells aimed at them directly; none of them were so peculiarly inclined. Still, one could not blame them for lamenting as their storefront, its expensive windows, and most of their wares were blown away before their very eyes.

And then, without a moment’s delay...

“Wind Cutter!”

“Wind Edge!”

“Clay Pillar!”

“Water Lance!”

Shoop, shunk, ba-doom!

“Stop it!” the men shrieked again. “Stop! *Stooooop!!!*”

“Wind Cutter!”

“Wind Edge!”

“Clay Pillar!”

“Water Lance!”

Shoop, shunk, ba-doom!



“St-st-st-stooooooooop iiiiiiit!!!”

“Wind Cutter!”

“Wind Edge!”

“Clay Pillar!”

“Water Lance!”

Shoop, shunk, ba-doom!

“S-sirs, please do something about this!” the most senior of the staff begged the bodyguards, unable to bear the sight of such destruction any longer. Clearly, they hoped that if they could just shut the girls up for now, they might be able to deal with the situation properly later.

It was true that as long as there was no concrete proof of wrongdoing and no witnesses—both of which did exist but might *mysteriously vanish*—the company stood a chance of getting the town guard on their side, cozying up with the local nobility, and making the whole thing go away. They had probably done something similar plenty of times in the past.

“Guess we better,” the head of the bodyguards grumbled, giving the girls a once-over. “Little girls or no, a team of four mages and swordfighters is a bit much for you folks to handle...” Apparently, both Mile and Mavis’s attire meant they still counted as swordfighters, despite the fact that they were both using magic. “Oi! Let’s go, lads!”

“All righty...”

The bodyguards slouched toward the girls at a leisurely pace, clearly not thinking much of these opponents but realizing that they needed to earn their pay.

“Oh!” Mile loudly announced. “Those wicked villains are coming right for us! We’ll have to fight to protect ourselves in legitimate self-defense!”

Her delivery was incredibly stiff. You could have replaced her with a cardboard cutout.

“First up is me, Mavis, the swordswoman! Let’s do this!”

“*What?*” muttered the assembled. They had no idea what was going on.

The bodyguards stopped in place, equally confused.

“Uh, well, if I don’t go first, chances are pretty good that I won’t get a chance later...” Mavis explained, deadpan, before breaking into a grin.

It would be reasonable to expect the girls to assume a “hunter-like” formation, weaponizing the fact that they had mages among them and organizing themselves into front and back lines in order to compensate for the fact that, technically, they should have been at a severe disadvantage—both in terms of numbers and individual battle strength. To send their fighters out one by one was the height of folly, allowing each girl to become a sitting duck for slaughter—a mistake too stupid for even amateurs to make. No one who took the idea of battle seriously would do such a thing.

“I guess that makes sense...” Reina muttered.

“Now that I think about it, she really *hasn’t* gotten to fight much lately,” Mile quipped.

“We probably *should* let our leader have a bit of the glory here,” Pauline agreed.

The three of them took a respectful step back.

The men were silent. There were some mages who, though young, were capable of going toe to toe with veteran swordsmen. However, in battles of pure steel-on-steel, physical prowess, raw ability, and experience were the deciding factors. That experience, more to the point, was a product of the months and years spent honing one’s skill, and the number of times one had immersed oneself in true carnage. Thus, while there *were* mages of tender years who could win against a seasoned swordsman, no young swordfighter could say the same—much less a woman of not even twenty.

“I’ll take her,” said one of the men with a sneer, stepping forth and unsheathing his sword. “I believe it’s time to teach the young mistress a thing or two about the world. Or perhaps a thing or two and then some...”

With that, the man took a stance...

“Godspeed Blade!”

There was a rush of movement, and he collapsed on the spot. The fight was over in an instant.

The other men were bewildered.

Naturally, he was not dead; Mavis had only struck the man with the flat of her blade.

To those familiar with the Order of the Crimson Blood, this would come as no surprise. A man who lacked the skill to make it as a soldier or a hunter and probably neglected his daily training could never stand a chance against Mavis. She hadn't even needed to break out her *True Godspeed Blade*.

“Next up is I, the magic knight and perfectly normal girl, Mile! I look forward to our fight!”

“Being a magic knight *already* bars you from being ‘normal’!”

Mile took a snappy step forward, ignoring Reina's objections.

“You've gotta be *kidding* me!” another of the bodyguards snarled, stepping up. The fact that he acted alone was a testament to either his pride or his stupidity. If the former, he might have been thinking how pitiful it would look for all five of the remaining guards to attack at once. If the latter, he might have thought Mile nothing more than a dim-looking twig of a girl. After all, her hands were smooth, her movements amateurish, and her armor was clearly that of a swordfighter, not a mage. And, unlike Mavis, she was barely a teen, much less an adult.

A large ring of spectators (read: rubberneckers) surrounded the fighters. If the men swarmed Mile all at once, they would utterly lose face and never be able to work in this town again. Even if they won, five men against one girl just looked *bad*. Imagine a group of bodyguards who needed five whole men to take down a little rookie waif of a hunter. They would be the laughingstock of the town.

“I ain't gonna kill ya, but yer gonna learn today that if you play with fire, yer gonna get burned,” said the man, readying his sword.

“Ultimate Technique: Lightning Sword!”

Mile launched a deadly blow. Technically, it was only a regular swing of her sword, but after Mavis had shown off her Godspeed Blade, there was no way she’d pass up a chance to say something cool as well.

With a sharp clink, her sword cut right through the man’s, then turned ninety degrees and smacked into his flank. Like Mavis, she had used the flat of her blade, so as not to kill him.

The four remaining men stared in wide-eyed disbelief, their emotions clear to all the onlookers.

Mile then stepped back...but the men had already lost a fair bit of their will, along with their pride.

“Hyaaaaaaah!!!”

They launched an all-out attack. With Mile and Mavis no longer in front of them, they were faced with two girls, both obviously rearguard mages. A pair of rookie mages would be unused to battle at such close range. They hadn’t even begun any incantations. Surely, they would be bowled over in an instant.

The bodyguards, as well as various protectors of citizens and merchants around the town, mostly worked with swords. It was tough to use a spear or bow in a crowded shop, and a blade made it much easier to attack or defend at a moment’s notice, and to match someone else’s timing and their swing. These men were still pros, even if they were working as low-ranking a job as this. They’d trained together, and could handle a preemptive strike at some rookie mages who hadn’t even starting chanting spells yet. There was no chance they could lose.

Normally, that is...

“Dirt Pillar!”

Shoom!

“Ouch!!!”

Within mere moments, dozens of earthen rods, a few centimeters each in diameter, erupted from the ground beneath the men’s feet, impeding their

movement. Naturally, a number of them struck the men directly as well...right in the groin.

Some swooned on the spot, unable to even speak. Others crumbled, their eyes wide and spinning. And others fell sideways, impaling themselves on the pointed tips of the poles.

“Ice Spear!”

Next, a shower of icy spears came flying at them head-on. Their tips were blunted, but being struck with a spear of ice was still nothing to sneeze at. It was also clearly overkill, as the group of men had already lost the will to fight. At least they weren’t actually dead.

The crowd of spectators, men and women alike, cringed as they watched the scene unfolding.

Silent casting.

Unlike the *true* silent—and instant—casting that only Mile and the Wonder Trio could use, what Reina and Pauline did was something of a fake. They just did the incantations in their heads, which still took a fair bit of time. However, Mavis and Mile’s bouts had given them more than ample time to complete those incantations and simply hold the release, leaving them able to attack in an instant.

The five shop employees, who were at this point half—no, fully—in tears, came running at the girls, arms flailing. Naturally, Mavis took them all out without hesitation. It was unclear if their desperation stemmed from some sort of loyalty to the company or simply from their own concern over the consequences they might face later if they did not at least attempt to do something about this.

Given Mile’s stilted setup of the fight—and what they’d seen of the takedown of the bodyguards, who all seemed to at least be alive—the shop staffers must have come to the conclusion that their best bet was to be defeated without being too terribly injured. That way, they could at least be able to show their faces to their bosses after the fact.

Given that a double-sided blade had no blunt edge with which to strike, Mavis

instead pulled her sword, scabbard and all, from her belt and struck the men down without even unsheathing it—a duller blow than even the flat side. This was out of consideration for the men, since even striking them with the flat of a blade would be too harsh for a group of complete amateurs. In other words, the men had in fact succeeded in avoiding too much physical damage.

(Scabbards weren't usually this durable, but this was one Mile had made.)

It was worth noting that the Crimson Vow had chosen to begin this farce precisely at the second morning bell, just as the shop would be opening, so there would be no customers in the store. Since all the employees had come rushing out when the commotion began, there was no one inside at all. Indeed, the attack only began after Mile confirmed this fact with her search magic, so even though the preliminary attacks aimed at the front of the store had been unleashed at full strength, there shouldn't have been any human casualties. And even if there had been other attendants deeper inside the store, any sounds of explosions or destruction would have surely sent them flying out the back door. There was no danger of harming anyone with subsequent attacks.

Thus far, there had been no sign of any higher-ranking staff member, like a head clerk or the store's owner. It stood to reason that they, too, had probably fled from the back entrance and were in the process of making their way around to the front of the shop. Anticipating this, the girls began firing their magical attacks at the shopfront again.

Just then, a voice cried, “St-stop! What are you doing?! O-oh my Goddess! *My stooooooooore!*”

A rotund man came tottering forward, flanked by several other fellows. His face fell the moment he laid eyes on the scene.

“I take it you're the criminal who abducted a young beastgirl and are holding her as a slave? The scoundrel who directly violated the ancient agreements, and wishes to launch again the war between humans and demi-humans?” Reina announced ominously.

“He must be one of those cultists who aim to restart the Great Demi-human War...” Mile proclaimed in turn.

The owner went white as a sheet. If what they were claiming was proven to

be true, those directly involved would be beheaded, all the shop's assets seized, and the firm left to ruin. No wonder he looked panicked.

So, why would he have done something so foolish as engage in the slave trade in the first place? Well, like most criminals, he would have assumed that he would never be found out. No employee or servant would ever risk their own life, let alone those of their families, for the sake of some slave they had no connection to. Furthermore, any customers he might have made aware of his work would be members of a select clientele, the sort one shared a mutual trust with—or rather, shared incriminating information, in order to assure some kind of mutually assured destruction. And if a prospective buyer *were* to spill that dirt, it would be simple enough to testify to that snitch being an accomplice in the matter and dragging them down with him. Even if turning oneself in were to lead to a more relaxed sentencing that would extend only as far as perhaps being decapitated rather than hanged—which, at the end of the day, amounted to a rather insignificant difference. No, nothing good could come of incriminating oneself. Regardless of how everything played out, the snitch would be on the same slow boat to hell as the company's owner.

Furthermore, for all the talk of beastfolk and demons being “equal” to humans, there were still plenty of people who would have reacted very differently had it been a human girl in question. Yes, there had been agreements at the time of the great ancient wars, but those had been mostly a result of conditions that the fearsome elder dragons had forced upon humans.

Demi-humans, simply put, were *not* human. Thus the name. They acted as though they were human but could never—so the bigots said—attain full humanity. They were but half-baked imitations.

Unfortunately, there were still many who subscribed to this incredibly outdated way of thinking, and perhaps even worse, those people were convinced that everyone else truly felt the same way somewhere deep down. People like this would happily keep a beastchild—a *demi-human*—as a pet, like some kind of animal, dragging them out to parade in front of guests, just as this merchant did.

And in case someone on the payroll *should* go to the guards, a merchant like that would have been sure to make friends with the lord in charge of this town

and have the head of the town guard on retainer, so anyone who came to talk to them would be apprehended and forced into criminal indenture. Should any of the merchant's family members raise a fuss, they would find themselves faced with trumped up fees for damages owed and saddled with piles of debt.

There was no one under the merchant's employ who would dare say a word, knowing the consequences they would be inviting.

It should go without saying that any particularly honest sorts would have already been weeded out of the merchant's household ages ago. Some would have gotten the axe, some would have quit on their own, and still others would have been forced to take the fall for some past wrongdoing that even they did not seem to recall...

Selective pressure is defined as a natural selection process that eliminates those individuals who are underperforming, or unfit, to ensure the continued survival of the species. In a company like this, a similar force would work to remove the most morally upstanding and reasonable individuals, leaving behind only those with the adaptability to follow the orders of their less than scrupulous boss. Put simply, all of the employees still left would be as bad as their employer.

"There's no way that this could have been going on without the staff all knowing," said Mile.

"So what you're saying is, it's fine if they end up in the crossfire, so long as we don't kill them?" Reina confirmed.

Mile quickly amended her statement. "Just the store employees! I don't think that all of the maids and other low-ranking servants back in the living quarters are involved, so keep them out of it!"

"Uh, whatever..."

Reina's face twisted, clearly less than happy to have to rein herself in, but her friends were well aware that she would never harm someone who did not deserve it.

"Anyway, let's get back to it!"

"All right!!!"

“Wind Cutter!”

“Wind Edge!”

“Clay Pillar!”

“Water Lance!”

Shoop, shunk, ba-doom!

“Stooooop iiiiiiit!!!”

And thus, the Order of the Crimson Blood continued their reign of destruction, heedless of the desperate pleas from the owner and his staff—until the town guard arrived on the scene...

When the guards finally arrived and saw what lay before them, they stopped, speechless.

Where *were* they right now? The site they had rushed to was the storefront of one of the most preeminent mercantile firms in town. Or at least, it was *supposed* to have been.

They stared slack-jawed at the unrecognizable mountain of rubble that was once allegedly the shop. Now, only about one-seventh of its former structure remained. For some reason, in the middle of the mountain was some sort of passageway, about two meters wide, that seemed to have been spared the destruction.

When he finally came to his senses, the captain of the guard shouted, “What the *hell* is going on here?! Someone! Explain this!”

However, there was not a peep from any of the onlookers. No one seemed to want to get involved. Those associated with the business were either too shocked to respond or else kept their eyes to the ground, none too keen on getting involved with the authorities. And those who had gone to call the guards had obviously been away from the scene when the destruction had occurred, so they had no explanation for the current situation.

When no one gave him any response, the guard captain looked around, troubled. “You there!” he shouted, spotting someone. “You work for the

Hunters' Guild! Tell me what happened!"

Unfortunately for the man in question, the guard captain happened to recognize him. At the captain's words, he held his head in his hands, not looking especially happy. They were near the center of town, so while the guard barracks were close, the nearest guild branch was closer, and all the hunters and staff had come rushing out when they heard Mile's initial proclamations. For the hunters, it was just a way to kill the time, but the guild clerks were worried whether the fight might involve the guild somehow. All they knew clearly at the moment was that this fight *definitely* had nothing to do with them.

No good could come of any guild member or employee getting themselves involved in a situation of this magnitude. At best, they would be expelled from the guild; at worst, they would be hanged. So they were merely here to observe and gather information. Suddenly being called out while they had been doing nothing but watching the fight surely would have been exasperating.

The man turned his head left and right, hoping that *any* of his colleagues might come to his aid, but they all carefully averted their eyes—nor did any of the hunters step in to help. Left with little choice, he slowly pointed—his eyes hollower than the world's most lifeless fish—towards four young girls who stood huffing through their noses, looking very proud of themselves.

It was a silent appeal from the bedraggled employee, who clearly wished to involve himself as little as possible with this situation and direct the guard to the real culprits. The guard captain turned to the girls, seeming to understand the guild employee's reticence. At which point, the poor man heaved a sigh of utmost relief.

"You four," the guard called. "Can you explain what's going on here?" For a guard, his tone was fairly polite. This might have been because he had seen the ears atop their heads—which would have been hard to miss—and realized that, as a public official, he had to maintain an appropriately respectful stance toward beastfolk. Alternatively, he might simply have realized that this was an incredibly delicate situation that merited the taking of precautions, simply because—beastfolk or not—they were a group of young girls, including some children.

He likely assumed that the guild employee had pointed out the four of them merely because they were aware of the circumstances behind the current situation or because they been observing the scene from the start. It was unthinkable that *they* might be the cause of the dreadful state of the shop before them.

“Well,” said Mile, “before we get into that...” She removed her cat-ear headband. The others followed suit, removing each of theirs.

“What?” came a voice.

“*What?*” others piped up in confusion.

“Whaaaaaaat?!”

The guards and spectators were dumbfounded.

The members of the Crimson Vow had only worn the disguises so as to make it more difficult for any third parties to intervene, but they knew they had to reveal their true status at some point. Failing to do so would only mean that the beastfolk would end up getting blamed for the whole incident. At this point in the game, it did not matter if anyone else tried to step in, so it was time for them to make their status as humanoids abundantly clear.

There were more screeches of disbelief, but now it was up to the guards to take charge of this scene, the captain in particular. Realizing that these were not beastfolk, but indeed four human girls, he now took an even politer tone in spite of his obvious continued confusion.

“Young ladies,” he said, “could you tell me what you saw here today?”

Though clearly annoyed at being treated like a child, Reina turned to the man, clearing her throat. “What we saw were these pieces of trash who have imprisoned a beastfolk child in a dungeon, keeping her as a slave, and those worthless men writhing on the ground there, who tried to attack us when we asked about the child—and I suppose that hidden door, right over there, which leads to the dungeon?”

“Wh...?”

The captain was lost for words. In Reina’s explanation, she had mentioned

kidnapping and enslavement only in passing, but she was speaking quickly enough that the captain seemed to think she had witnessed these crimes. This was, of course, intentional on her part—she had memorized her lines the night before.

“Th-this is utterly baseless slander!” the merchant frantically protested. Yet, unfortunately for him, he had not listened closely to what Reina had said. If he were in a clearer state of mind, he would not have overlooked the most fatal part of her statement. Hearing the terms “imprisoned in a dungeon” and “slave” left such a strong impression that he completely missed another key phrase: “hidden door.”

“Mile!”

“On it!”

At Reina’s command, Mile headed straight through the passage that cut into the rubble, put her hands on the ground, and flung open the door. Because the area around her was clear, nothing obstructed the view, so the guards and spectators could see everything. Naturally, that was the reason she had made sure to clear the rubble in the first place.

A minute or so later, Mile emerged, carrying a young girl in her arms.

“Oh my—!”

“How horrible!”

“What is going on?”

The crowd began muttering in horror.

The girl Mile carried was dressed in rags, a bandage wrapped around her head, and the skin around her left eye bruised a deep crimson. Her left arm was in a filthy sling. Her right leg was wrapped in more bandages stained a deep red.

Silence fell over the street.

“I-I have no idea why she looks like that! I dressed her in clean clothes, and I never once harmed her! There must be some mistake! Someone else did this!” the merchant valiantly protested, but no one so much as acknowledged him, let alone believed his words. After all, he had just admitted to being aware of the

girl's existence *and* the fact that she had been in his care.

"There is a dungeon in the basement. You can see it for yourself!"

At Mile's suggestion, the captain directed two of his men to go underground. They returned, confirming, "There's a dungeon down there—or rather, a number of prison cells. Judging from the chamber pots and the blankets, they appear to be in active use. The lock was broken open on one of them..."

In fairness, there were some minor differences between a prison and a dungeon, though in practice they were not all *that* different. A prison was not a place for holding criminals who were en route to their sentencing, but the place to keep someone under long-term arrest for the safety of themselves or others. As such, the accommodations were somewhat better than your average jail cell. The Crimson Vow had purposely referred to the place as a dungeon, but the guards would not lie to the captain in their report.

Naturally, when Mile had extracted Salisha, she had not sliced clear through the wooden lattice but instead made it look as though she had bashed the lock numerous times with the butt of her sword.

The merchant glared at the guard captain, gritting his teeth, rage on his face and murder in his eyes. The clothing and bandages and the dirt and traces of blood on the little rabbit girl were, of course, a trick of costuming and makeup. Mile would never have harmed Salisha, and the girl was not actually being physically abused. Mile had merely carried up a young, imprisoned girl who had been playing make-believe as an injured person in order to pass the time. There was no chicanery happening here.

"Listen! I don't know what's going on! I'm not the one who hurt her!"

Nor was there any falsehood in at least *that* part of the merchant's claim...

The merchant and his clerks, along with the employees Mavis had struck with the sheath of her sword; the other hired hands and servants who had come out from the back; and, of course, the bodyguards were all taken in by the guards. Afterward, they would be questioned, with easier sentences for those who had known nothing of the girl's enslavement. At the moment, however, there was

no telling who was guilty and who was innocent, so they had no choice but to detain the whole lot.

By putting on this big of a production, the Crimson Vow had made sure it would be impossible for anyone to cover up the matter of the beastgirl's imprisonment. With a crowd this big, there were bound to be merchants from other cities or countries, undercover agents, and others. There was no way to hide what had just occurred. Furthermore, to keep from catching any heat themselves, the local lord and any lower-ranking nobles and officials subordinate to him would be sure to wash their hands of the merchant. As would the upper brass of the guards, any previously friendly smaller merchants, and everyone else.

It was almost certain that the capital would be hearing of this. As would the leaders of other fiefs...

The ancient treaties were arrangements put in place by all the races combined so as not to rekindle the flames of the Great Demi-human War. To enable the sort of crime that would risk those treaties was considered a grave sin. Violators would be struck down with impunity, for the protection of all. If one were to even suggest supporting these sinners, one would soon find oneself on the wrong end of a sword.

Any noble or merchant worth his salt should be well aware of this, but alas, there would always be a few hardheaded men who refused to study history, as well as those dunces with an unfounded sense of invincibility who figured they would never get caught or have to face punishment.

If they'd had only one cell down there, they could have claimed that it was for the sake of locking away some relative who should not be seen by the public eye or some such, but there's no way for them to come up with a satisfying excuse for having that many. Plus, we managed to expose the hidden safe with the damning documents inside of it by destroying the walls around it, so the authorities should hopefully find it pretty soon. Now then, time to make our escape...

"H-hold it right there!" The captain of the guard called out to the Crimson Vow as they tried to slip quietly away, Salisha in tow.

Hmph.

The Crimson Vow—or rather, the Order of the Crimson Blood—all sighed internally. They had been hoping to fade peacefully into the background, but this was, of course, an unrealistic hope.

“We need to get a witness statement and testimony from you all. Come to the guard headquarters with me. This is just standard procedure, and we may or may not need you to give your report to our lord as well... You needn’t worry. Judging by the circumstances, it’s clear that the merchant was in the wrong here. I’d just like to get your statement. And also...” He trailed off, glancing at the wreckage that had once been the merchant’s shop.

They had clearly overdone it. It was only natural that they should have to give some justification for that as well.

Crap, thought Reina.

This is bad, thought Mavis.

Well, we’re in a bit of a pickle, thought Pauline.

We need to find some way out of this, thought Mile.

For a group who fancied themselves on the side of justice, they were not especially keen on actually being cross-examined themselves. If the guild were to get involved, it might come out that the four were not registered under the strange name they had shouted earlier—the Order of the Crimson Blood—but rather, the Crimson Vow. Of course, giving a false name in and of itself was not a huge issue. It would have been a more serious matter if they had claimed the name of some other party that actually existed, but there was nothing truly problematic about them using a different name to take on an independent job that was not brokered through the guild. It was not as though there were not more prominent parties who regularly gave a false name when taking on volunteer jobs that were below their station, so as not to harm their reputations—much like when well-known manga artists secretly publish adult works under a separate pen name.

Still, in this case, the members of the Crimson Vow were not too keen on their true identities being linked to the job they had just done.

A secondary matter was the fact that Salisha's injuries were purely superficial—a product of costume and makeup. Obviously this was problematic. How would a young girl who was locked away in a cell have managed to do all that on her own? How would she have gotten her hands on cosmetic products? Where would she have learned how to create false wounds? If pressed, Mile would have to explain that perhaps Salisha had gotten a little help from a certain someone.

Another problem: Mile herself had to be the one to issue this job, which meant that, in essence, this was a wholly independent action. If they had merely rescued Salisha, it probably could have been written off as a chivalrous act of justice, but leaving the shop in its current position went a bit too far. It was almost certain they would be asked why they did not simply inform the guards of what they knew rather than taking such drastic action all on their own. Of course, if they *had* gone to the authorities, it was possible that those who were being bribed would have quashed the matter and instead taken the Crimson Vow into custody, but they couldn't exactly say that to the guards themselves, who would insist they would never be party to such corruption. Even if the guards themselves were unimpeachable, there was no telling where the merchant might have informants, who might have tipped him off at the slightest whisper of the Crimson Vow's plans. This was just another reason why the hunters had no choice but to take matters in hand themselves—for Salisha's safety!

Yet as sound as their reasons for acting had been, it was less than ideal to be asked to explain any of them to the guard captain. All members of the Crimson Vow were very much in agreement about that.

"What?! Stand down, you pompous fools!" Mile turned to the captain and began an arrogant proclamation, hoping to bluff her way through. "You don't require our testimony to know that those scumbags got their hands on young girls like this one through kidnappers and their intermediaries! You shall receive the evidence you need and more from extracting *their* confessions! *We* are merely enacting the will of the Goddess El!"

Mile was careful in her wording, so as not to falsely imply that she was an oracle speaking the words of a goddess directly but was just a messenger,

conveying the goddess's will secondhand. In all fairness, there was (in Mile's head) an extremely complex and unnatural pun behind this, something to the effect of her doing some laundry later to wash away her sins, but of course the guards didn't pick up on any of that.

"Th-the will of a goddess?"

"El? I've never heard of that one..."

"Servants of a goddess, carrying out her divine will..."

They were a group of girls, two of whom were still children, who had known of the existence of a young girl who was trapped underground, and had bravely stepped forth to save her. What remained of the store looked like it had been struck by heaven's wrath, and there truly was no way that the path to the girl's prison could have been the only part of the site to remain clear without *someone's* intervention. For the more pious believers, this was more than enough proof that a goddess had been involved.

Naturally, there were many pious sorts among those who made their living on the battlefield. Only the most soulless criminals did not cling to some system of belief when their very lives could be snatched away by the whims of fate at any moment.

As a result, then, the guards and their captain were a faithful bunch.

"Our only duty is to see this girl safely home. It has been ordained that the punishment of the evildoers be carried out by Her pious servants who are in a position to do so. Do you all fancy yourselves such individuals?"

"O-of course, my lady!"

The captain took on an even more polite tone—clearly a reaction to the increasingly strange circumstances and, perhaps, the mention of the goddess's will.

"Well then, we shall leave the rest to you. Let your judgments be wise... Fare thee well!" Mile exclaimed, immediately activating an invisibility field around them so that the Order of the Crimson Blood and Salisha vanished before the crowd's very eyes.

Mile left the sound barrier down, instead holding a finger up to her lips to signal for the others to keep quiet. This way, they could hear the crowd but not vice versa. Salisha understood the signal and nodded, the plan having been thoroughly explained to her the night before.

“Th-they disappeared...” the crowd muttered, frozen in shock.

The girls began moving quietly towards the rubble and sat down in the shadows where no one would approach them. Because the invisibility field was not tangible, if anyone else stepped through it, they would see them. They would never be able to get away from the scene while the streets were still packed and someone might bump into them at any moment.

Making a tangible barrier, meanwhile, would cause a stir when someone suddenly collided with something that they could not see. Under those circumstances, they would quickly find themselves surrounded. So, it was better that they wait until the spectators dispersed and they could get away cleanly.

It feels like I dropped the ball here, Mile thought. I should have come up with a more efficient way for us to escape. But we have to know what’s going on out there, so I can’t put up a sound barrier and let everyone talk...

No matter how skilled at magic Mile might have been, she still had not figured out how to manage that... It truly was a waste of talent.

“...se...”

“Praise...”

“Praise the goddess!!!”

“Praise her servants!!!”

What? the members of the Crimson Vow were stunned at the shouts that were beginning to arise from the crowd.

“Praise the goddess!!!”

“Praise her servants!!!”

“Praise the goddess!!!”

“Praise her servants!!!”

“Praise the goddess!!!”

“Praise her servants!!!”

An expression of utter bliss played on Mile’s face, drool practically spilling from her lips as Salisha clung to her tightly, her face buried in Mile’s bosom. The others watched her, nonplussed, figuring they ought to allow her at least this much of a reward for all her hard work on behalf of the kidnapped beastgirls. The rest of them could not say they would not be equally happy to claim the role of the hero who had rescued the young damsel—under those circumstances, Mavis would have had much the same reaction as Mile’s now.

Still...just how long *was* the crowd going to keep up this cheering?

After quite some time, the crowd finally dispersed, and the Crimson Vow were able to make their exit, meeting up with Shurana, who had been waiting for them. Together, they all left the town behind. Worried for her physical condition after having been locked up for so long, Mile carried Salisha on her back, Mavis carrying Shurana in turn so as not to hear any complaints of unfairness. She got the sense that Shurana might have been feeling anxious after having to wait longer than anticipated, perhaps worrying that she had been left behind. It was typical of Mavis to be so considerate—and this was one of the reasons that she was so popular with girls, though of course Mavis herself did not seem to realize this.

As she held tight to Mavis, Shurana’s cheeks pinked.

“Okay,” Mile started. “That’s mission complete. Now to just get them back to the village.”

Though Mile had not included the words “as slowly as humanly possible,” her intention was obvious to everyone. They avoided calling her out about this less out of consideration for Mile and more so that they did not put the young girls

on edge.

“So now we’ve dealt with the actual kidnappers, the merchant intermediaries, and the distribution center, where documents with all of the relevant proof should have been confiscated by now.” Pauline summarized their progress to date, then continued.

“All of the slave acquisition and sales routes that company controls, and all of their clients, will be rounded up. A lot of their victims should be rescued and freed. There are a lot of situations where you can get by with bribes and working your connections, but good luck when it comes to matters involving the old treaties. No human would want to touch something that could see their entire family beheaded for even the slightest involvement, not for just a little bit of profit. The cost-benefit analysis just doesn’t work out. Typically, the kinds of people we’re dealing with here can utilize their money or influence to make problems go away, but when this much information has already gotten out that’s no longer possible. No one is going to step in to help them out once things have gotten to this point. On the contrary, they’re likely to give all that they can to help put the issue to bed before the flames spread and they end up as collateral damage. If we were talking about a human victim, the whole thing might have been a little less complicated, but when there are other races involved, things get serious fast. In other words, the circumstances worked out in our favor,” Pauline explained.

Mavis and Reina nodded in agreement.

“At the very least, we can assume that we’ve wiped out the illegal slavers in this kingdom for now. Everyone—beast, human, and otherwise—should be safe.”

“Whenever there’s an opening in a lucrative market, though, someone else is sure to step in,” sighed Reina with a resigned shrug.

But Mile chimed in, her eyes gleaming, “I don’t think that merchant was the only surviving member of his species.”

She never passed up a chance to make a reference. That was a Mile Guarantee...

“We’ll arrive at the village soon,” muttered Mile.

She’d been in high spirits after getting her fill of cuddling with Shurana, the fox girl, and Salisha, the rabbit girl, but now that it seemed her paradise was almost at an end, there was a listlessness behind her smile. She’d known the moment would come, but it still hurt for her days of bliss to finally come to an end.

“Enough! We already walked here slower than we needed to. You should be plenty satisfied by now,” Reina chided.

“Well, I suppose you’re right,” Mile grumbled. Though her appetite could never truly be satiated...

Fwoosh!

“Ahh!!!”

Reina, Mavis, and Pauline shrieked as something suddenly flew down from overhead. Mavis immediately drew her sword, while Reina and Pauline brandished their staves and began their incantations.

Mile, meanwhile, did not appear surprised. Normally, she might not have bothered running her search magic this whole time, but she was not one to skimp on safety precautions when she was protecting two young girls. Furthermore, having to keep her guard up for monsters or other assailants by non-magical means took effort—effort that would have kept her from fully enjoying her time with the girls. To even consider such a thing was utterly unforgivable.

“Shurana! Salisha!”

The thing that had dropped down in front of them—which just so happened to be the lookout who manned the outer edges of the beastfolk village—called the two girls’ names. It was a small village, so naturally they all knew each other by name. This man knew exactly who the two missing girls were—and also recognized the Crimson Vow, who themselves had been in town not long before.

“Y-you four...”

He began to say something to the Crimson Vow but was suddenly so overcome by emotions that he couldn't speak. He didn't have to. The members of the Crimson Vow gave him a silent nod and continued walking forward. The lookout nodded back, perhaps because he was simply still unable to form proper words. This was the point where he normally would have gone running and shouting to the other villagers to let them know what was going on, but as he was currently on lookout duty, he had some decorum to maintain. Only a fool would leave a hole in the village's safety net and expose them to danger simply to satisfy his own emotions. Running around screaming to alert the others would not make the children's homecoming any safer.

Plus, it was this group of human girls who deserved all the glory. So, the man calmed himself and returned to his duties, while the six girls continued farther into the village.

“Shurana! Salisha!”

“Oh! Oh my goodness!”

“Someone go tell their families! Call the chief!”

There was an immediate commotion. This should have been no surprise. The culprits behind the kidnappings had been captured, sure, but the villagers still had not held out much faith in the humans being able to return their offspring. They were well aware that the merchants and nobles of other lands had connections with powerful people who were beyond the control of the local lords and the Hunters' Guild. So, all they could think to do was capture and punish the culprits who had come into their home—the kidnappers themselves—in order to make an example of them. These were, of course, men who had abducted a number of beastfolk children, so few would argue they deserved to return home alive or even enjoy a death that was quick and painless.

The difference here was that the Crimson Vow had not only captured the kidnappers, as they had been hired to do, but also gone above and beyond what was asked of them to retrieve the victims. Such kindness was a surprise.

And on top of that surprise was the most important surprise of all: two young beastgirls returning to the village safe and sound.

“Shurana!”

“Salisha!”

“Sherry! Where is Sherry?!”

“Ah...”

Mile had already removed Salisha’s makeup and false bandages and gotten both her and Shurana cleaned up in the Crimson Vow’s portable washhouse. They were dressed in normal clothing from Mile’s inventory—she kept children’s clothing on hand just in case, though what she picked out was much finer in make, and a bit more stylish, than what the children of this village normally wore.

That, however, was not the issue.

“Sherry! Why isn’t Sherry here?!?!”

Sherry was, of course, the girl who was called Lilia back at the count’s manor—the one who had wished to stay behind. Now, her family was jostled aside by the families of Shurana and Salisha, who rushed to their daughters, weeping joyfully.

“What happened?! Why is Sherry the only one missing?! D-don’t tell me...”

“Sh-she’s...alive. She’s not dead!!!” Mile shrieked as a woman who was probably Sherry’s mother grabbed her by her jacket and hoisted her half into the air. However, the woman was not satisfied by the response and only hoisted her higher.

“Grr...”

“Auntie, please!”

“You’re choking her!”

“Let her down!”

The other members of the Crimson Vow frantically tried to get the woman’s attention as the collar of Mile’s jacket seemed to tighten around her neck. Obviously, a feat like this was something only one of the beastfolk could

achieve. Even an older woman like this, who did not look as though she was trained for battle, was possessed of superior strength. Or perhaps it was merely that her internal limits had been surpassed as she raged over her missing daughter...

Eventually, the others were able to rescue Mile, but the hardest task still awaited them: reporting the unfortunate news to Sherry's mother, father, and brothers. They could not do it in front of the throngs of other villagers. This was a rather shameful discussion to be had, for both Sherry and her family.

"W-we'll tell you more later! At the chief's house! Relevant parties only! Please just let us rest for now!"

Mavis's desperate plea—and the fact that Mile had said that Sherry wasn't dead—was enough to finally bring the woman back to her senses somewhat. The other villagers attempted to calm her down, and the Crimson Vow stepped aside to give them space.

Chapter 111:

Back at the Village

“Y-YOU CAN’T be serious!”

Sherry’s mother was flabbergasted.

“So you tried to rescue her, but she refused because she wanted to *stay*? My Sherry would *never* say that!”

It was no surprise that this seemed a far-fetched tale. No parent could ever believe that their own child would rather remain in the house of a kidnapper of another race than come back home to them. However...

“She’s getting treated the same as the noble’s kid?”

“She gets to eat tasty foods, wear pretty dresses, and never wants for anything?”

“A-and she might get to marry the lord’s son, his *heir*?”

“Take us there, too!!!” Sherry’s sisters all screamed in unison, cutting through their brothers’ silence.

Sherry’s parents were taken aback.

Gathered in the chief’s lodgings were the chief and his wife, the Crimson Vow, Sherry’s family, and a few other influential figures in the village. This wasn’t something fit to discuss before a crowd, as it didn’t exactly reflect well on Sherry’s parents. Therefore, this meeting had been restricted to as few participants as possible. The other villagers seemed to realize that there were good reasons for this, for no one had raised any complaints about being excluded.

Obviously, everyone gathered had anticipated being in for quite the doozy, but no one had expected *this*. Indeed, Sherry’s parents still didn’t seem to fully understand, so the Crimson Vow prepared to explain the situation even more clearly than before. Mile laid things out as best she could, based on what Sherry had told them. It was usually Mile who was left to do the talking in situations

like this.

“Umm, well... She told us that she was treated poorly because she’s a girl, and that she couldn’t bear the thought of never getting to leave this village or aspiring to something beyond a marriage with someone here. She said that she could live a happier life there.”

Out of consideration for the family, Mile had edited Sherry’s statements slightly. Hard as it might be to believe, her actual words had been even harsher.

“Um...”

“Why her?! It’s not fair!”

“.....”

Sherry’s brothers, sisters, and parents all had very different responses.

“I know,” said one of the girls, “we should just leave the village!”

“We don’t have to be kidnapped—we can just go on our own and start a normal life in a human town.”

“I’ve heard some people are bigots out there, but it would still probably be a better life than living in this chauvinistic backwater...”

“What if we worked as hunters, like these girls? We’re stronger than humans, so I bet we could make a killing! I’m guessing hunting’s a job that has a lot to do with your abilities—”

“That’s true! If we could just get one or two other girls to join us...”

“What?!”

All the color drained from the girls’ parents’ faces.

“But then who would look after us?! You *can’t* go!” their brothers protested, seeming to completely miss the point.

“Ah...”

A thought suddenly occurred to the village leaders. If word of this got out and all the young women agreed with these girls, they would have a problem on their hands.

A sound escaped from the mouth of the village chief, and then those of the other leaders.

“Ah...”

“Ah?”

“Aaaaaaaaahhh!!!”

They were eventually able to settle the matter without further incident, Mile explaining that Sherry had in fact been incredibly lucky—Salisha had been held prisoner, and Shurana positioned as a lowly servant in her household, treated like the lowest of the human workers but without even being paid. Not to mention the fact that, in both cases, the girls’ fates would have likely grown worse as they got older.

But even once her parents were mollified, Sherry’s sisters weren’t so keen on dropping the matter. Everything they’d just heard about their sister’s new lifestyle was extremely appealing, compared to their lives in the village. Their parents and the village elders were growing increasingly concerned by their enthusiasm at the prospect of a different life. If news of Sherry’s situation got out to the other young women of the village, it would clearly cause quite a stir.

“Wait,” said one of the sisters. “We’ve heard the fates of those who were kidnapped from the village and sold as slaves, but we haven’t heard a single point against girls from this village forming a hunting party and setting out to seek our fortunes. If a group of weak human girls who aren’t even grown could have enough of a reputation to be trusted with taking out a kidnapping ring, shouldn’t we be even more successful?”

“Guh!” The adults all grimaced as though they had suddenly been struck somewhere painful.

Reina, however, looked even more displeased. “Go ahead, everyone,” she said.

“Copper cross-cutter!”

“Copper quad-cutter!”

“Hellfire!”

“Helix Shot!”

“Please forgive us!” the girl shouted.

“We got carried away!” the other two apologized.

And with *that*, the matter was settled.

The next day, however, Sherry’s sisters hid themselves from their parents in order to carry on a private discussion.

“If we can just get to where Sherry is...”

“That’s right! We can just get her to make us introductions and land a job with her master...”

“Or better yet, maybe her master has more than one son?”

“Ooh!”

“At least, there have to be sons of his business associates and any nobles that stop by... You see what I’m saying? Half of all human children are boys!”

“Ohhhh!!!”

One would think that was obvious...though perhaps there was a greater gender discrepancy in the birth rates of beastfolk.

“So, do we know where she is?”

“Yeah, I remember the name of the town that they mentioned.”

“Perfect!”

“Okay, now we just need to get our hands on a map. Sherry’s not going to be the only one of us to get away! Onward, to our bright future!”

“Let’s go!”

“I truly don’t know how to thank you enough,” the chief said, bowing his head deeply to the members of the Crimson Vow. His thanks were probably forty

percent for saving the girls and sixty percent for saving the village from ruin, thought the girls with wry smiles.

“You have completed the job you were contracted to do, and so, we have signed the completion certificate and notified the guild. However, you have truly gone above and beyond, and even if the rest of what you did for us was on your own time, outside of that contract, it would shame the beastfolk race to let you leave without any thanks or recompense. So please, accept our gratitude. I assume by the fact that you previously captured those criminals without petitioning us for a reward that you will not be seeking any huge payment for this kindness, either, but...well, you understand how this is a problem for us, don't you?”

Clearly, it was a matter of reputation and pride.

Mavis, who wanted to be a knight, understood such matters far better than most. But even the other three had at least some idea of how such things worked. Though they knew why the village chief believed they ought to receive a reward for their efforts, they were still reluctant to be paid a large amount for something they had done of their own initiative. They couldn't stomach the thought of receiving cash or any other valuable goods from villagers who—much like the elves—had little in the way of such things to offer. They exchanged looks, wondering what they ought to do.

“I know!” Mile suddenly gasped. “Instead of a physical reward, we can have them contact the elder dragons for us!”

“Umm, what?”

The other three were bewildered.

“Well, the beastfolk told us before that they have means of contacting the elder dragons, right?”

“Oh, you're right!” said Reina.

“They did say that,” said Mavis.

“I suppose they did...” Pauline agreed, thinking back.

“So, as our reward for completing our rescue quest, we can ask them to

contact the elder dragons! That won't cost the village any money, and it's something that we can't do on our own, so it'd be a big help. That sounds like more than enough reward to me!"

"Hmm..."

What Mile was saying made sense, but there was a justifiable suspicion in Mavis's voice.

Reina articulated her own skepticism. "Let's say we get in touch with the elder dragons—then what?"

Well, that was the problem. What was the *point* of calling up the elder dragons?

With a broad smile, Mile replied, "Obviously, we have them take us to a demon village!"

"Come again?"

The other party members narrowed their eyes in suspicion.

"Well, like Pauline said before, the demons live in the northernmost part of the continent, far beyond the mountains. No merchants head up that way, so there would be no caravans for us to tag along with. And walking all that way sounds like a pain," Mile said, glancing at Pauline.

She was guessing this was at least part of the reason that Pauline had previously been so opposed to them traveling to a demon settlement. Both Mavis, who dreamt of being a knight and had followed in the footsteps of her older brothers since her youth, and Reina, who had grown up with a traveling peddler for a father and worked as a hunter for years after that, were more accustomed to walking than your average person.

And Mile? Did you even have to ask?

Indeed, the biggest issue with traveling place to place on foot was Pauline slowing the party down. Pauline herself was well aware of this fact and hated it, meaning that she tended to avoid the situations altogether when possible.

"We can get Kragon—who definitely owes us one!—to carry us there through the air! Then we can check off our bingo cards for having been to *all* the

different races' villages!"

"Makes sense," the other three nodded.

"Makes sense, my foot! How could you say such ridiculous things with a straight face?! Trying to use an elder dragon like a pack horse?! You commit as grave a sin as that, and the elder dragons are gonna turn around and murder all of us!" the chief exclaimed, the other beastfolk leaders nodding along.

Indeed, this would have been the reaction of most reasonable creatures in this world. Except—

"The elder dragons owe us a favor, actually..."

"And also, they're super big."

"They could probably serve as a carriage a hundred times over."

"Ah ha ha..."

The beastfolk listened to this utterly absurd exchange, their mouths flapping wide open.

Unable to turn down the Crimson Vow's request without withdrawing his offer of a reward for their labor, the village elder very reluctantly went about contacting the elder dragons. Before he did so, however, he insisted the Crimson Vow sign a sheepskin contract stating that if anything were to happen and the elder dragons grew angry, the Crimson Vow swore to take responsibility for the whole thing—and were prepared to give their lives if necessary. It would take a certain amount of mental preparation to actively summon the dragons, and one did have to be sympathetic to the chief's plight. Their fear was an entirely natural one—for everyone but Mile and her friends.

With the contract signed, the chief went ahead with summoning the dragons, though his methods for doing so were not disclosed.

"...and that was why we called you here."

"Ha! At your service!"

This mysterious contact method could apparently convey textual information as well, and it was the familiar Kragon who arrived to fulfill the Crimson Vow's request. At the sight of the elder dragon, the beastfolk stood stock-still, their eyes intent on the massive creature who, strangely enough, behaved as though he were some manner of underling. (Such reactions were quite commonplace around the Crimson Vow.)

"We would like you to carry us to a demon village."

"Gladly!"

Kragon seemed thrilled to do Mile's bidding, even though it amounted to him serving as a carriage for four human girls. Comprehension was beginning to dawn on the beastfolk. They looked like they were beginning to abandon trying to find a logical explanation for any of this.

"Will this be all right?" asked Mile, a bit concerned. "I've heard that giving lower life-forms a ride on your back is super demeaning for an elder dragon, except in cases where you choose to do so yourself..."

"What, is that what you're worried about?!" Kragon replied with a laugh. **"That's only the case if we're being forced to do so against our will or as something we must do as part of an agreement. If it's a request from you, however, Lady Mile, I would gladly accept at any time, to repay all that you have done for me!"**

The members of the Crimson Vow grinned. Dragon Mount acquired!

"We did it! Next, an airship!" Mile crowed.

"Ah..." the other three sighed. Of course, no airships existed in this world, but they all were aware of what she was talking about, thanks to her stories.

The Crimson Vow asked Kragon to go home for now and return in a few days' time to take them north to where the demons lived. He had offered to carry them back home to the capital, but the party unfortunately had to decline, realizing what a panic that might cause in the city.

"We have already sent word back to the lord and to the guild letting them

know your original job—the dissolution of the kidnapping ring—has been completed,” the chief explained. “We also thanked them for sending out the most powerful forces you humans possess. Should we not tell them of your further accomplishments in rescuing the children and taking out those dastardly merchants?”

“Ah ha ha...” The girls laughed off his question. The accomplishments in question had nothing to do with them, the Crimson Vow. It had been the work of the mysterious party known as the Order of the Crimson Blood. It was that mysterious party who had independently involved themselves in the grey area of meddling in the affairs of foreign lords and merchants.

The Crimson Vow had impressed this upon the chief over and over again, asking him to please not let anything strange slip to the guild or the lord. Like most beastfolk, he was possessed of a strong sense of loyalty, so they were confident he would keep his word. However, he wouldn’t be satisfied if he didn’t give them *some* praise for saving the little girls, so he had yet to drop the subject.

The Crimson Vow were already certain that his help with the elder dragons was enough reward for something they had done all of their own volition, but the beastfolk were quite obstinate that this had been the bare minimum and simply not enough thanks...

“Whew, the chief *finally* gave it up...”

“He acted like we were torturing him by trying to get him to give up on paying us extra!”

“Ah ha ha...”

This process had been more mentally taxing for Pauline, who had to suppress every instinct in her miserly body, than the other three. Still, she had not tried to stop the rest of the party from refusing. She really was a good person at heart...just one who loved money.

“It’s been quite a while since we finished our actual job.”

“The villagers already sent a report back to the guild, though, so I don’t think

there's any worry of it having been treated as a failure."

Typically, if a party took too long to return and give their report about a job, the job would be deemed a failure, the party assumed AWOL at best and dead at worst. If enough time passed, they might even be expunged from the guild register. The guild still did its due diligence, especially in cases like this, where there were special circumstances involved. If the Crimson Vow did not return, then the village would probably be contacted for information about what had happened.

At any rate, they need not worry over that, since the chief had already reported his gratitude for the Vow's performance, which was sure to raise their evaluation in general.

So, the party headed back to the capital without a single care.

Around that time, a somber air hung over the capital branch of the Hunters' Guild, the members of which worried that something might have happened to the Crimson Vow on their return. Though it had already been ten days since the village chief had sent report of the job's completion, they had seen neither hide nor hair of the girls.

A few days later, when the members of the Crimson Vow flung open the door of the guild hall and cheerfully announced their return, they were immediately descended upon by a crowd of shrieking staff and other hunters...

"Why were they so angry?!"

"And why did we have to treat each of the hunters there to an ale?! I mean, thankfully there weren't that many people there at the time. Small mercies..."

"Ah ha!"

Reina and Pauline grumbled as they left the guild hall, Mile chuckling darkly.

"Ha ha, well, obviously they were worried about us. Honestly, I'm thankful that we have people that worry that much about us!"

"No way, they were just using it as an excuse to get free ale! How do I know

that? They all said they were worried, but no one came to look for us!”

Mavis thought that it was inevitable they should be scolded and was, in fact, grateful that the others cared enough to be worried. Reina, on the other hand, was not pleased about having been yelled at, and Pauline was even less happy about the expenses incurred in being forced to treat the other hunters to a round. In truth, the yelling they had been subjected to was not a true dressing down so much as a stern lecture—less of an angry attack than strong words delivered for the sake of educating the young hunters so they would not repeat this course of action in the future.

Though both may have sounded more or less the same, a dressing down and a lecture were distinguished by the very different intentions behind them.

Reina and Pauline’s pouting was mostly posturing. Internally, they were sorry about all the worry they’d caused by being gone so long without sending word... probably. It was just as possible they weren’t considering that at all, but were just teenagers caught up in their own feelings. Mavis and Mile were beginning to have some understanding of that.

“Why don’t we take four days off before we head out? Sound good?” Mavis proposed.

The other three nodded. This required no debate, as their departure date had already been established—it was the day that they would head out into the nearby woods to meet up with Kragon. They had only planned for three days’ rest, initially, but had overestimated how long the return trip would take and wound up with a day to spare. For a hunter, not building time buffers into your plans—reserving days for changes of circumstance or leisure—could mean a loss of credibility, or even your life.

Cowardice, anxiety, and overplanning—those were the keys to living a long life in this world.

“You four were gone so long! Do you have any idea how worried I was about you?!”

“Aha...”

When the Crimson Vow returned to their inn, it was time for round two of the day's lectures.

Lenny's worry was to be expected, especially given how young she was. Whenever they left town, they would tell her when they expected to be back, and they had blown far past that estimate.

Obviously, they did not *have* to tell her anything about their comings and goings. They always packed up everything when they set out, leaving nothing behind at the inn, and it was quite normal to be delayed, depending on the job. However, this was Lenny they were talking about, so...

"You completely neglected the hot water supply for the baths! And how were we supposed to attract customers?!"



This was the real reason for her dismay.

“You know, *why is* it we keep staying at this inn?” Reina wondered. “There are inns with far better amenities out there, who would be happy to have us...”

“Ah ha...” The other three chuckled darkly.

Really, there were no teeth in Reina’s threat. Despite everything, the inn was comfortable and convenient, the owners were lovely, the food delicious, it was cheap, and there was a bath—even if it was Mile who had been the one to construct that bath. Plus, Lenny worked herself to the bone, and she had her endearing qualities. Sure, she was a cheapskate, but it was not wholly out of selfishness—she was so driven only because she wanted her family’s business to make a bit more. Which was a far more compelling reason for scrimping than Pauline had...

Plus, her attitude just had a lot to do with her being bashful about things... probably.

The others had gone along with Mile’s proposal to visit the demon village so easily for two reasons: first, because they truly could think of no other reward that would satisfy the beastfolk’s consciences without placing a financial burden on the village, and second, because they knew there was probably no way to convince Mile to give up on the idea at this point. Plus, they were all aware that the reason she actually wanted to visit demi-humans of so many different races was to find out why the elder dragons had been investigating those ruins.

However, the *real* reason they did not oppose her was that they wanted to indulge Mile at least now and then, given how accommodating she always was to others. Their wish was to make *Mile’s* wish come true. Or at least, that was how they saw it...

Mile, Pauline, Reina, and Mavis spent the next four days visiting the library, cafés, and the orphanages by the riverbanks. They counted their coins and generally followed their own whims. Until...

“Why are you heading out again so *soon*?!” Lenny wailed. The four left the inn, unheeding...before Lenny could realize that they did not provide her with a return date. After all, if they did not establish a date at the outset, she could not accuse them of coming back “late” afterward. It had taken a while, but the party had finally realized this was the best route.

As for the guild, the Crimson Vow had requested an audience with the guild master, during which Reina explained that they had *somehow* ended up in a mess that involved them going with an elder dragon to a demon village. (They were all in the room, of course, but it was Reina who did the talking.) Because it was Reina and not Mile who was speaking, the assertion that this situation was a “mess” was not a complete lie. As far as Mile was concerned, everything was going according to plan. The others, however, really had been dragged into the situation—by a certain “average” young girl.

In explaining things this way, they hoped that the guild master would misconstrue the whole thing as not something they themselves had petitioned for but rather something they *had* to do, by the will of the elder dragons. The Crimson Vow never told an outright lie unless they absolutely had to, and Reina was careful to speak the truth, even as she stretched it a little. If the party *did* have to lie, they would, but here, it seemed possible—and preferable—to avoid true dishonesty.

It was fine to commit a little sin in the pursuit of justice. Or so the Crimson Vow deemed.

They hadn’t *had* to speak to the guild master. In fact, they had gone out of their way to do so because, for one, it would look bad for a hunting party to suddenly vanish without a word, and for another, being spotted leaving the country might stop the clock on their minimum in-country service calculator, which they could not abide. As such, they had sat down and carefully calculated how they planned to explain this situation, so that it would sound as though they, having had a previous acquaintance with the elder dragons, had gotten called out for some reason.

With this explanation in place, the other hunters and staff would have to sympathize with the Crimson Vow’s situation. They were acting at the behest of elder dragons, who cared nothing for human wills, so this was as good as an act

of God, and not their fault whatsoever.

As with other jobs that might take them out of the country, this would have no effect on their service hours. If the clock was stopped for a job like this, the Crimson Vow might refuse to go, thereby risking the elder dragons' wrath and bringing about the likely destruction of the capital. No guild employee would ever dare risk so great a danger over such a pointless statute.

Giving the guild master a bit of a heads-up also avoided the risk of having the elder dragon come to collect them anywhere near the capital, which would cause a mass panic. Since the guild master would know exactly why they were leaving, they could choose a meetup spot a bit farther out—also avoiding the possibly pitiful scene that would arise if A-or B-rank hunters tearfully began volunteering for a job to investigate the elder dragons, fully prepared for their own deaths. Such things had happened before...

At any rate, the Crimson Vow were able to leave peacefully and did not have to worry about how many days they would be gone.

"We've seen humans, dwarves, elves, and beastfolk, and now it's finally time to visit the demons! I've gotten the special achievement of visiting the faeries, too, so this will be a true one hundred percent complete run!"

Though Mile had not actually set foot in the faerie village, she *had* captured—er, had exchanges with—all of the villagers, so she figured that counted. She had already given up on the elder dragon village (?), since their enormous size meant they didn't bother with any buildings or structures, and there would be no interesting food for her to eat. She did have *some* fragments of common sense, every now and then.

"He's late," Reina grumbled.

The party had already been waiting at the meetup spot—the forest near the capital—for quite some time. Unfortunately, a wait was to be expected; there were no accurate clocks in this world, so meetup times were usually rather vague. They could only ever get as far as agreeing on times like "at the first morning bell," "in the morning," "before lunch," "at the first afternoon bell," or "this evening." It was no strange occurrence to see a partial day—or even a few

days'—delay with riders and carriages as well, as their travel depended on the weather and the condition of the roads, whether any wagon wheels or axles broke, whether a conveyance was attacked by bandits or monsters, and so forth.

No matter how close they might have been to the capital, there was not a soul who could rightfully complain about delays to a meeting out in the wilds. Even Reina's grouching did not truly come from a place of anger or frustration.

It was mostly thanks to Mile that their party was typically more punctual than usual. There were many things that she could do that the average person could not, such as instantly free a cart that was stuck in the mud or lift up a wagon fully laden with goods to repair a broken axle. Whether it was a shared carriage she happened to be riding in or a caravan they had been hired to protect, this was a service that she always provided.

This was also why, whenever the Crimson Vow offered to take an escort job, the hiring party always responded immediately. Typically, they would check in with the guild to find out a party's standing and reputation, and sometimes meet up with them first, but with the Crimson Vow, the acceptance always came promptly and without many questions. Of course, the Crimson Vow were skilled and reliable, but this also could have been for any number of other reasons, such as the fact that they were all attractive young girls, or that they had mages with water and healing magic, or they could use storage magic... There were also many who were happy to pay extra for Mile's cooking along the way.

At any rate, even when meeting up with humans, one might find oneself waiting outside for as much as a few days. So if you were meeting up with a long-lived being, whose sense of time far differed from that of a human...

At the very least, they could be safe in the knowledge that an elder dragon would not experience any delays in travel.

Later, as the members of the Crimson Vow sat drinking tea together, a black speck finally appeared in the sky and swiftly began to grow... Kragon had arrived. However, given how long he had made them wait, the Crimson Vow

figured there was no shame in making him do the same, and so they sat and continued enjoying their tea and sweets at their leisure.

“Now then, let us depart, Lady Mile.”

A creature who lived as long as an elder dragon had no issue with waiting a little while. Or rather, this was the part where he *should* have raged about being made to wait by a “lesser life-form,” but Kragon would never show such anger towards Mile, for whom he held such gratitude. For him, the time he was idle would have felt like nothing more than a few seconds, so it was really no big deal.

Of course, Kragon was polite to Mavis, Reina, and Pauline, both because he had seen their prowess in battle and because they were companions of Mile’s. But Mile was the only one he considered himself indebted to. He did not truly respect the others and was allowing them to come along solely because they were with Mile, little more than a bit of extra baggage on his back. As such, it was up to Mile to do the talking.

“Sorry to make you wait after coming all this way,” she said.

“Please, it is truly no trouble at all. Even a few days would to me feel no different than a handful of seconds would for you humans. And besides, any change in routine is a welcome relief from my daily tedium. For you, Lady Mile, to whom I am so deeply in debt, it is but a pittance. Of course, I cannot say that I’m not simply buttering you up, so that you might aid me should I lose any body parts again... Do ask of me anything you wish.”

Mile laughed. “If that ever happens, I’ve got you!”

She was unsure if he was joking or serious, but either way, it cost her nothing to make this promise. There were few things in the world that were capable of injuring an elder dragon that seriously.

Kragon’s obsequies might have been just politeness, meant to set Mile at ease, but regardless, she decided to wholeheartedly accept his kindness. She could certainly enjoy the peace of mind that came with knowing she could obtain the means of super-high-speed travel for her and her friends in the

future, should they ever need it. Plus, it seemed like Kragon really did need some way of staving off his everyday boredom.

“So, what matters will you be attending to this time?”

Mile had already told him the destination, and understandably, he was wondering what she would be going to the home of the demons to do. He had already proposed that they get going but had made no move to lower himself so that the members of the Crimson Vow could climb on. Perhaps this was because he would not be able to speak with Mile while they were flying, and he seemed keener to continue the conversation than hasten their departure. By asking about their plans beforehand, he could ruminate on them during the flight and ask any follow-up questions that occurred to him once they had landed. At any rate, he truly did seem to enjoy the task of serving as their stagecoach.

Mile, happy to meet his expectations, explained their business simply—too many details and it would probably spoil his fun.

“First,” Mile said, “I’m going to watch as Reina and Mavis receive overtures from the demon men.”

“What?!” This was news to the two older girls.

“Oh my!”

The pair in question blushed, but Kragon seemed rather intrigued by the proposition. The love affairs of humans should have been no more interesting than watching salmon spawn to him, but Mile knew from eavesdropping on Berdetice at their first meeting that Kragon had rather a sparse courting history for his age, so she thought he might find this useful reference for his own dating life.

“Then,” she continued, “I’m going to gather some information about what you elder dragons are investigating at those prehistoric ruins.”

“Wh...?”

This time it was Kragon who seemed surprised. The dragons had only employed demons as workers at their sites. Said demons seemed to be receiving some compensation—it was not as though they were unpaid slaves—

and had agreed to go along with whatever the dragons were doing. They would never have refused an order or request from an elder dragon, but this meant they didn't necessarily have much information about the deeper purpose of their tasks. It seemed extremely unlikely that the demons would ever blab about an elder dragon's affairs to a *human*.

But Kragon simply shrugged these thoughts away.

It was not as though he was particularly invested in any of this. Though once a warrior, Kragon was now merely a liaison between the elder dragon village and the excavation sites. A human independently investigating the ruins was none of his concern, and he was under no obligation to report it.

And if he *did* report it, no one would listen. The elder dragons in charge of investigations and research wouldn't care about what some lowly human was up to. It would be like a security guard coming to a preeminent university professor and telling them that there was a local kindergartner investigating the same topic that said professor was researching. At best, they would be laughed off; at worst, heartily scolded for daring to interrupt important research with such tomfoolery.

"And finally," Mile went on, "we're going so I can get a perfect clear! I've visited humans, elves, dwarves, beastfolk, and faeries. All I'm missing now is demons, and I'll have visited all the races! A one hundred percent run!"

"I-I see..."

Kragon had no idea what she meant by a "perfect clear," or why this might be valuable. But he was a wise dragon and understood that everyone had their own systems of value, even among elder dragons. Besides, he was quite fascinated by Mile, so he decided not to question her on any of this.

After some time, the group finally departed, headed for the land beyond the mountains, at the northernmost end of the continent.

"Both engines at full throttle. Destination: the homeland of the demons. Kragon—depart!" Mile crowed.

"I figured you'd have something to say," sighed Reina.

“She never does pass up a chance to use one of the catchphrases from those stories of hers,” said Pauline.

“I think that might have been from the sequel to ‘Sky Battleship Yamato.’ That one really made me cry,” said Mavis.

“I hope that doesn’t mean this is going to end with us self-destructing!”

As always, the Crimson Vow were in top form.

Bonus Story: The Invitation

“A DESIGNATED HUNTER? What is that?” asked Mile, looking as dumbfounded as her compatriots.

One day, when popping in at the guild hall, the members of the Crimson Vow had been pulled aside by one of the clerks and brought up to the guild master’s office. They were bewildered by what they heard.

“A designated hunter,” the guild master explained, “is someone who accepts jobs that are treated as direct requests from a client, independently of the guild. This is most likely to happen when it’s a job that *can’t* be accepted officially—or it’s a job that the hunters wouldn’t normally be able to take but simply must for reasons of sentiment. Since this job ostensibly isn’t going through the guild, the client will post the request slip on the job board themselves. It will say something like ‘cleaners wanted,’ and it won’t list the details or the pay, only a point of contact, so most hunters wouldn’t give it a second glance.”

“It’s like the first edition of a comic! The version of the magazine before it was revised for publishing! A whopping 100-ton hammer!!!”

As usual, Mile had begun shouting something that no one else understood. By now, even the guild master had grown accustomed to her strange behavior, so no one so much as blinked an eye.

“I knew there was something there when I first heard about this concept...” Mile babbled to herself, clearly dreaming up some play on words with how she might read “designated hunter” in Japanese and the name of a certain anime.

“Obviously, it would be a slightly unconventional job,” the guild master confirmed, “but there are certain tasks that fall just within the bounds of the law, and might even border on criminal if done poorly. Those kinds of jobs require someone skilled, with a strong sense of morals, justice, and dignity, who isn’t hurting for money. It’s the sort of delicate job that can’t be left to normal

hunters. In fact, there are few hunters who would be trusted with this at all.”

The members of the Crimson Vow were silent, looking back at him with an odd expression. They were obviously happy that he was recognizing their skill and had faith in them. However, he was also clearly angling for them to take on some kind of nuisance of a job. Yes, they were glad to think that this invitation was only being extended to them because the guild master knew they had what it took to overcome any troubles. However...

“No thank you!”

“No thank you!”

“No thank you!”

“No thank you!”

“What?!” the guild master cried as four rejections came in swift succession. “Wh-wh-why not? Getting this sort of invitation is a huge honor for a hunter—proof of just how good your reputation has become!”

“Be that as it may, we have to keep the job a secret, don’t we? We’ve never heard anything about this sort of arrangement before. That means that only a few people in the guild are ever going to hear about this. The cost-benefit analysis associated with a job that will only raise a few people’s opinions of us but has a high likelihood of being a pain in the butt is just far too dismal. It’s a bad deal,” Pauline explained.

“Plus,” Reina added, “we’ve already built up a great reputation just by completing normal jobs, so something like this holds no appeal, don’t you see? We have no reason to purposely go and make trouble for ourselves.”

“Uh, well...”

They were correct—if this job was not going through the guild, they would not be receiving any official guild support, which meant it was, by definition, risky. Normally, no one would be allowed to post a job directly to the job board without going through reception. Even if the guild tried to claim the client had posted it themselves, that claim was a little fishy. The whole situation required someone to consciously operate outside the rules of the system, contacting a client all on their own without going through the proper channels.

For a hunter, getting involved in something like this could be a breach of guild contract. Even just accepting a job that someone had posted up independently could be a breach of contract.

And so, if the guild were so inclined, they could place all the blame on the hunters when something went wrong, the guild wiping their hands of the matter. In fact, they could play the victims in the situation.

“No thanks!”

There was simply far too much risk—and in this case, there was hardly any benefit to be had anyway.

“So,” asked Reina, “how many are there at this branch of the guild right now? These ‘designated’ hunters?”

“Er... Um, well...” the guild master stammered.

“I’m guessing there’s not even one,” Pauline clipped.

“Uh, w-well no... That’s why...”

“And I’m guessing that you asked us first, so that if you extended the same invitation to anyone else you could say, ‘Well, the Crimson Vow agreed!’”

Even Mavis, who was normally quite open-minded, was not having any of this.

“We see how it is!” said the members of the Crimson Vow, in unison, as they turned and left the office—ignoring the guild master’s desperate calls behind them.

“Honestly, the *nerve* of that guy!”

“I know that he’s done a lot for our party, but that’s no reason to push that obvious of a red mark on us!”

“Right? Guild master or not, I can’t believe he’d pressure us like that.”

“It seemed like that wasn’t even an established system—he just wanted to use us to set up something new...”

All the guild staff and hunters present sensed that there was something the Crimson Vow were not happy about. As the party came grumbling down the

stairs, the others avoided making eye contact. Well, for the most part.

“You four. You are the Crimson Vow, yes? I shall be your party leader now, so I expect you all to fall under my command!”

“Oh my Goddess, it’s a real live overblown invitation from an arrogant maiden!!!” the Vow screamed out loud.

No, whyyyyyy?! screamed everyone else, inside their hearts.

The girl who had just issued this invitation—if you could call it that—appeared, to the Crimson Vow, to be a young noblewoman with golden curls. She might have been around fifteen or sixteen. Beside her were three women in their early twenties with swords, possibly her bodyguards or attendants. The three of them, perhaps having a bit more common sense, looked utterly mortified.

“No thanks, we’re fine,” Mavis swiftly said.

“You’re fine, you say? Good! That means that you’ve accepted!”

Apparently, the girl had completely misheard this refusal.

“What sort of stupid scam call is this?!” shouted Mile, who immediately seemed to grasp the situation. “Mavis, you have to be firm with these kinds of people! They’ll twist your words to mean whatever they want them to!”

“What?! O-okay...”

Though Mavis was scandalized to think that such people existed in the world, she knew that whenever Mile’s expression shifted this quickly it meant she was giving a serious instruction, so she swiftly obeyed.

“U-um,” she said, “we refuse your invitation! We will continue operating with just the four of us!”

Saying it that clearly should have been enough. Mavis was certain of this, until...

“Don’t be shy to admit to your own inadequacies. I shall make up for all that you lack and bring you to a higher level!”

“This is hopeless...”

“What in the *world* was that about?”

“Well, she’s clearly a noble’s daughter...”

Reina and Pauline grumbled to one another as the four of them dragged themselves out of the guild hall, having finally escaped this mysterious noblewoman.

“I’m guessing she’s just some spoiled noble who got bored of her dull daily life and thought she’d come amuse herself with this ‘all-girl party’ she probably heard a rumor about,” said Mavis.

“Seems right,” Mile agreed.

“Uh-huh,” the other two sighed.

“Ridiculous for a young noblewoman to just decide to become a hunter out of the blue like th—” Pauline began to say, then fell silent, looking at Mavis and Mile.

“I mean, there was that girl from Baron Aura’s household, who joined the Servants of the Goddess...” said Mile, apparently having picked up on something in Pauline’s gaze.

“Maybe have some self-awareness, dummy!” Reina howled.

“Seriously, our luck must be terrible today. What’s with these strange invitations one after the other?” Reina muttered as they approached the inn.

Don’t jinx us! the other three thought.

When they arrived at the inn...

“Now, it’s time to take a nice, relaxing ba—wah!”

Just as they made to step inside, a very *smooth* party approached them. A smooth-looking swordsman, a smooth-looking warrior, a smooth-looking lancer, and a smooth-looking ranger...

Where’s Ritsuko-san when you need her?

Again, Mile had something ridiculous on the brain.

N-no, don't tell me... All four of the girls were filled with dread.

“You four are the Crimson Vow, yes? We’ve heard a great deal about you. We are the Light of Hope, a B-rank party. We’ve come from the capital of the kingdom of Brandel.”

Did she really...?

“So tell me, how would the four of you like to join our party?”

She jinxed us!

“We’ve heard tell of you even in Brandel,” the man continued. “Not having any mages has really been weighing our party down. It was just as we were thinking to improve our combat tactics by adding a few mages that we heard of your reputation. You have a powerful combat mage, a healer whose talents are said to surpass that of a sage’s, one who commands both sword and magic, and the wielder of the Godspeed Blade... And you are all beautiful young ladies. I see no course of action but for your party to join ours! We have been called heroes, and many agree that they would be lucky to join us, but we have not found anyone worthy until now... You pass!”

“Come again?”

The members of the Crimson Vow were not happy.

Worthy?

Pass?

What in the *world* was he saying?!

“Well, you all aren’t worthy of joining *our* party,” snapped Reina.

“You fail,” said Pauline, cold as ever.

“I really doubt you could keep up with us,” said the normally genial Mavis.

“Just as you all have the right to choose, so do we,” said the kindhearted Mile, but there was a surprising steel behind her words. “I don’t believe we could ever get along with any self-centered individuals who think that *their* opinions are the only ones that matter.”

On the other side of the counter, Lenny shrunk back. This was the first time she had ever seen her friends truly angry. It was particularly terrifying how all four members of the Crimson Vow were prone to smiling in their rage.

This was bad, Lenny concluded. At this rate, the inn was going to end up damaged. That was what her instinct told her.

“H-h-h-h-heyyyy there, big sisters! Maybe you should wait to make a decision about combining your parties once you see what everyone can do! Maybe at the hunter training grounds! Or outside of town!”

“Of course. You make an excellent point.”

The Light of Hope gladly accepted this proposal, thinking this would be the perfect opportunity to beat a bit of sense into the Crimson Vow for their cheeky words and let them know just how inadequate they were without a proper vanguard. After a display of power, they were sure to be begging the Light of Hope to let them join.

Phew. The inn is saved!

Lenny had not the slightest worry in the world about the Crimson Vow leaving town with these strange men. She knew just how peculiar her “big sisters” were, after all.

“Forgive us!!!”

The next thing the members of the Light of Hope knew, they were on the ground of the hunter training grounds, an absolute mess, in front of a crowd of spectators.

Pour souls... the spectators thought. But really, what did they expect? The men had scorned—angered even—a group about whom they knew practically nothing. Most people who engaged in such stupidity would be dead, which meant these men were lucky to have learned their lesson and kept their lives. They should consider themselves blessed to have such an important experience without suffering any serious injuries—or at least, nothing that healing magic could not fix. Even if such injuries still included broken and crushed bones and severe burns...

“I’m beat!”

“I’m exhausted.”

“Emotionally and physically!”

“Ah ha ha...”

The day had been nothing more than one “invitation” after another. It was not the first day like this the Crimson Vow had faced—in fact, they often found on themselves on the receiving end of requests they did not want to fulfill. Such was the price of fame. For hunters, the more they suffered in this way, the more proof it was that they had succeeded in getting their names out there. People admired and respected them, so they tried to recruit them or use them...

They were inundated with attention from their fellow hunters, young folks who hoped to be hunters, and people who wanted hunters’ help. These burdens were par for the course, so the Crimson Vow could not truly complain. However...

“Seriously though, the *guild master* was the worst of them!!!”

They simply could not forgive the guild master for being as bad as the rest.

Afterword

LONG TIME NO SEE, everyone. FUNA here.

Welcome to Volume 15, our second volume since changing publishers to Square Enix. This time we got to meet the elder dragon squad...and some cute beastgirls?! Truly, Mile's paradise has arrived—along with her personal Fury Road!

MILE: "I'll destroy them all!"

It seems that the Wonder Trio have been up to quite a bit as well...

Next time, we'll be hitting up the demon village—while the mysteries surrounding this world and the identities of the unknown invaders slowly start to reveal themselves. Are we finally approaching the climax? Mysteries abound! Keep your eyes peeled for the next volume!!

Speaking of, there was a larger-than-normal gap between Volumes 13 and 14 because of the change in publisher, but things should start moving along more swiftly from here on...

Recently, I've only been leaving my house twice a week to visit the supermarket a three-minute walk away to buy groceries. I speak to others with the same frequency—enough to say, "No thanks, I don't need a bag." I don't ride the train, and I rarely meet up with anyone. It's a full corona lockdown life.

MILE: "Don't you get bored of living like that? Why don't you just hurry up and squash this corona thing so you can get back on with your lives?"

REINA: "Shh! He's living the exact same way he did *before* corona!"

MILE: "Ah..."

A-a-anyway! It's a life that keeps me away from the virus!

Keeping up with *Average, I Will Survive Using Potions!* has now passed one million total sales as well! By the time this is published, *80,000 Gold* will have gotten there, too. The fact that all three of these series have continued to be published with no talks of cancellation is all thanks to you, the readers, as well as those manga artists who have undertaken putting my works into comic form.

Comics sell way more than novels anyway, so as long as the comics sell, my future is secure! Not that I haven't been concerned for what that means for me as an author...

Oh, speaking of comics, the fourth volume of the spin-off manga, *Didn't I Say to Make My Abilities Average in the Next Life?! Everyday Misadventures*, by Yuki Moritaka, goes on sale on March 12th. If you haven't read it yet, don't miss this chance to snag it now! The art is adorable. Moritaka-sensei is definitely on the same wavelength with me with the humor and seems to understand the Crimson Vow even better than I do!

Oh, and it looks like the series is doing well overseas, too, with the English version (judging by the star ratings on U.S. Amazon!).

And finally, to the chief editor; to Itsuki Akata, the illustrator; to Yoichi Yamakami, the cover designer; to everyone involved in the proofreading, editing, printing, binding, distribution, and selling of this book; to all the reviewers on *Shousetsuka ni Narou* who gave me their impressions, guidance, suggestions, and advice; and most of all, to everyone who's taken these stories into their homes, I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

I am sure that we will see each other again with the next volume...

—FUNA



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